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Creation from Conflict: The Great War in Irish Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impact of the First World War on the imaginations of six poets - W.B. Yeats, Robert Graves, Louis MacNeice, Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley - all of whom have written in wartime: Graves in the Great War, Yeats in the Great War, the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War, MacNeice in the Second World War, Mahon, Longley and Heaney in the Northern Ireland Troubles. The thesis locates affinities between these poets in their response to violence, and compares the ways in which they have imaginatively appropriated the images and events of the Great War to facilitate that response.

Part I of this study begins by outlining the historical background to Irish participation in the Great War, and considers some of the issues involved in the Irish cultural response to the war which were engendered by the complex domestic politics in Ireland between 1914 and 1918. Chapters two to four constitute a more detailed exploration of these issues as manifested in the work of Yeats, Graves and MacNeice. In the cases of Yeats and MacNeice, their engagement with the subject of the Great War is re-evaluated in order to illuminate repressed or complex areas of Irish history and culture, and to shed new light on their influence on recent Northern Irish poetry. Consideration of Robert Graves's response to the Great War serves to illustrate the ways in which a high-profile association with the War can obscure relations to an Irish or Anglo-Irish tradition. The thesis discusses ways in which these poets have been misrepresented, and considers how far the misrepresentation can be attributed to the contrasting interpretations of the Great War in England and Ireland, and to versions of literary history based upon these interpretations.

The second part of the study concentrates on contemporary Northern Irish poetry. Chapter five considers problems pertinent to Northern Ireland in relation to the subject of the Great War by looking at the ways in which remembrance of the war, politicized in order to bolster mythologies of history, reverberates in the context of the Northern Irish Troubles. The final three chapters outline the difficulties encountered by Northern Irish poets Mahon, Heaney and Longley, under pressure to respond to the Troubles, and relate these difficulties to those encountered by the Great War soldier poets. The chapters explore the extent to which the fascination of these three poets with the Great War illuminates their aesthetic strategies, revises aspects of Irish political and cultural history, offers a way of responding to the violence in Northern Ireland, and has determined critical responses to their work.

The thesis is concerned with ways in which the Great War has been imagined in Irish writing. It also shows how and why those imaginings have struggled with, and revised aspects of, reductive mythologies of history and competing versions of the literary canon.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A	Derek Mahon, <i>Antarctica</i>
DN	Seamus Heaney, <i>Death of a Naturalist</i>
FW	Seamus Heaney, <i>Field Work</i>
E & I	W.B. Yeats, <i>Essays and Introductions</i>
GF	Michael Longley, <i>Gorse Fires</i>
HN	Derek Mahon, <i>The Hunt by Night</i>
L	Derek Mahon, <i>Lives</i>
N	Seamus Heaney, <i>North</i>
P	Michael Longley, <i>Poems 1963-1983</i>
PWBY	Louis MacNeice, <i>The Poetry of W.B. Yeats</i>
SP	Derek Mahon, <i>The Snow Party</i>
TGO	Michael Longley, <i>The Ghost Orchid</i>
WO	Seamus Heaney, <i>Wintering Out</i>

Preface



*"Whenever war is spoken of
I find
The war that was called Great invades the mind"*
-Vernon Scannell¹

*"I have not painted the war...but I have no doubt
that the war is in...these paintings I have done."*
-Pablo Picasso²

Martin Stephen writes that:

The Second World War killed roughly five times as many people as did the First, brought untold destruction to civilian populations, and in its final throes unleashed a horror that could - and still can - wipe out life on earth. The facts, and logic, dictate that if any images dominate poetry they should be those of Hiroshima, Dachau, and Stalingrad. Certainly these images appear frequently in modern writing, but it is far easier to find the images of the Great War...The Great War seems to exert a terrible and perhaps terrified fascination over the modern imagination, and not only in terms of poetry.³

This thesis considers the work of six poets, only two of whom - W.B. Yeats and Robert Graves - wrote during the Great War itself, and yet all of whom reveal in their work an underlying, and sometimes overt, fascination with the images and events of the Great War. With the exception of Robert Graves, none of the poets here discussed has firsthand experience of combat, but all of them have written, and forged their aesthetic theory and practice, in wartime: Yeats in the Great War, the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War; MacNeice in the Second World War; Mahon, Longley and Heaney in what Terence Brown calls the "nasty little Northern Irish war which began in 1968, that had its roots in the soil of 1912 and 1916 as well as that of the Great War".⁴ Graves, spectacularly, wrote and published through all these events, though he is popularly

¹ "The Great War," *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence*, ed. Martin Stephen (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 311.

² Quoted in Medbh McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994) 9.

³ *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence* 289.

⁴ "Who Dares to Speak? Ireland and the Great War," *English Studies in Transition*, ed. Robert Clark and Piero Boitani (London: Routledge, 1993) 232.

associated largely with the Great War, only occasionally with the Second World War, and not at all with the Irish wars in the twentieth century.

In the cases of Yeats and MacNeice, my contention is that their engagement or fascination as writers with the subject of the Great War has often been either misrepresented or underestimated, and that to re-evaluate that engagement is not only to illuminate repressed or complex areas of Irish history and culture, but is also to shed new light on these two poets' influence on recent Northern Irish poetry. Robert Graves's inclusion in a study of Irish poetry might seem rather more arbitrary. He is not claimed here as an "Irish poet", but his position is instructive, notably in relation to Yeats and MacNeice, since one might say that for Graves the reverse situation holds true: his high-profile association with the Great War, notably through *Goodbye to All That*, and his status as one of the longest-serving soldier-poets on the Western Front, have problematised, at times wholly obscured, his relations to Ireland and to Irish letters, both consciously on his part, and unconsciously on the part of his critics. For all three, the misrepresentations have their roots in the ambiguous place the Great War holds in Irish memory, in the dominance, in critical thinking, of English understanding and mythologies of the Great War, and in the sometimes reductive versions of literary history consequent upon these two things.

For several reasons, the second part of this study focuses on contemporary Northern Irish poetry. The fallout in Ireland from the World Wars has been particularly divisive: partition after the First War; the Republic's neutrality, and Northern Ireland's participation, in the Second. Remembrance of the Great War, in which men from all parts of Ireland participated, is an issue which reverberates in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. But, as will be seen, the complex and competing mythologies that emerged in Ireland have given that issue different resonances north and south of the border. In addition, events in Northern Ireland over the last thirty years have brought different pressures to bear on poets in the North, pressures which have encouraged, or certainly given a new dimension to, the fascination with the Great War. They have also helped to determine the strong influence of Yeats, Graves, MacNeice, and other poets

of both World Wars, on the aesthetics of the Northern poets considered here. The misrepresentations of the earlier poets have been felt as pertinent to those working with what Mahon describes as “an inherited duality of cultural reference”.⁵ In choosing, therefore, to follow this particular, Northern trajectory, I do not wish to imply that the Great War has not exerted a fascination on the imaginations of writers in the Republic of Ireland, or that Northern poets are the only poets in Ireland engaged with the question of how to write about war. Rather it is the case that the experience of the Republic of Ireland in the post-World-War-II era in determining the forms of imaginative preoccupations with the Great War differs from that of the North and, for pragmatic reasons, falls largely outside the bounds of this study.

Paul Fussell attempts, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “to understand something of the simultaneous and reciprocal process by which life feeds material to literature while literature returns the favour by conferring forms upon life”.⁶ The influence of his work on contemporary thinking about the Great War has been immense. As Claire Tylee notes, “his book has itself become a major stimulus to literary imagination”.⁷ She acknowledges his influence in spite of the fact that the terms of his study are in some ways antipathetic to hers. To a degree, a similar process has occurred here. Two major objections have been raised in relation to Paul Fussell’s work. The first is that Fussell claims to write as an historian, one whose study of the literature of the Great War enables him to present a more accurate picture of the War than those offered by conventional historians, and yet not only does he ignore all other aspects of the Great War apart from trench warfare on the Western Front - the war at sea, the war in the air, the mobilization of industrial and financial resources - his text is pervaded with historical inaccuracies, and thus his profile even of the Western Front is “defective”.⁸ The second is that he fails to consider one of the myths he shares: by “[c]oncentrating in general on

⁵ Derek Mahon, Introduction, *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (London: Sphere Books, 1972) 14.

⁶ *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) ix.

⁷ Claire M Tylee, *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990) 6.

⁸ See Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, “Paul Fussell at War,” *War in History* 1.1 (1994): 63-80.

the British experience on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918, and taking the first day on the Somme in particular as an 'archetypal original', [he] quite unselfconsciously perpetuated the myth...that during war women's best place is at home, for 'War is men's business'".⁹

The first of these objections strikes as somewhat misconceived. Fussell writes not as an historian uncovering facts, but as a cultural critic concerned to elucidate the ways in which the war was "remembered, conventionalized, and mythologized",¹⁰ a process which may well be at odds with the actual causes, outcome, military facts and statistics of the war.¹¹ The second charge, though not unconnected to the first, is more pertinent here. Fussell posits war writing as experiential writing and simultaneously narrows the scope of war experience. Since women could not experience the actual fighting of war firsthand, their writing is, on the whole, excluded from his study. The assumption has, or could have, implications for post-war writers who return to the Great War as a subject even if they do not "remember" it. But while conceding Tylee's point that Fussell's terms, because of the Western Front archetype, work largely on the grounds that war is men's business, it is also the case that he attributes imaginative authenticity to writers who never set foot in a trench. Simon Featherstone's reading of Fussell's work is more helpful in understanding his influence: Fussell, he suggests, "veers between an analysis of war writing as a complex set of rhetorical strategies for expressing the inexpressible and a celebration of the literature as a special kind of experiential writing", producing, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a "creative tension".¹² It is a tension which has tended to inspire amplification of his work before it has provoked critique.

In relation to the Irish experience of the War, Fussell's study is both helpful and misleading. The "image of the trenches" as forming "the current idea of 'the Great

⁹ Claire Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* 7.

¹⁰ *The Great War and Modern Memory* ix.

¹¹ Thus, Fussell can describe the view held that the war would go on forever as "prophetic" even though the war itself ended in 1918, since the sense of the war as never-ending has persisted through the century.

¹² Simon Featherstone, *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 22.

War”¹³ resonates in Ireland as well as England. The Great War as it manifested itself on the Western Front was experienced by thousands of Irish soldiers as well as by their English counterparts. The image as metaphor for the human condition, as expressing an essential human consciousness, permeates Irish as well as English imaginations. But it is also necessary, particularly in an Irish context, to resist the consequent depoliticization of the War implicit in Fussell’s interpretation. In the move he describes as taking place in the trenches towards mythologising, towards fiction, the wartime period comes to be seen, as Featherstone notes, “as a parenthesis of history”. Such a sensibility is, however, less in evidence in Irish attitudes towards the War. Featherstone argues that Fussell’s description of wartime culture lacks “a sense of social and cultural diversity”, that:

[w]hile mythologizing is one process by which a writer like David Jones seeks to make sense of his experiences on the Western Front, to accept it as a principle for the study of First World War writing runs the risk of ignoring the persistent issues of social division and ideological argument that underlie the myth-making.¹⁴

One reason why the principle is less helpful in relation to the Irish experience of the War is that a body of writing equivalent to that of the English Great War poets and memoirists does not exist, or does not hold the privileged and prominent place such work has in the English tradition. Fussell’s “Oh What a Literary War” rings less true in Ireland, certainly for the period 1914 to 1918. The absence of such a response also means that the “issues of social division and ideological argument” inherent in the war cannot be sidelined through the prominence in cultural and literary history of the combatant experience of the war. In other words, if Fussell’s study is in some ways deceptive in relation to the English experience, in the Irish case such deception is, practically speaking, impossible. In addition, some of the strategies Fussell explores for dealing with the Great War - the idealisation of home, the virtues of English pastoral, the reaction against German *Kultur* - are not entirely appropriate to Ireland, if only because Ireland was not simply a country involved in the Great War, it was also a

¹³ *The Great War and Modern Memory* ix.

¹⁴ *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* 23.

country with divided loyalties that was on the verge of Civil War when the Great War broke out, and which dissolved into Civil War at its close. Even if one accepts war writing as experiential writing, the notion of what constitutes war experience cannot be restricted in Ireland to something which occurs away from the “Home Front”.

In effect, Fussell’s other and perhaps competing analysis of war writing, not as narrowly experiential, but as “a complex set of rhetorical strategies”, and his agreement in his final chapter with the assertion that “[i]n a not altogether rhetorical sense, all poetry written since 1918 is war poetry”,¹⁵ supply the most convincing model for this thesis. The thesis accepts Fussell’s view that the war in literature can “become Great in another sense - all-encompassing, all-pervading, both internal and external at once”. But it also suggests that the complex and sometimes very obtrusive politicization of the Great War in Ireland has lessened the possibility that the war can be perceived at the same time as detached from “its normal location in chronology and its accepted set of causes and effects”;¹⁶ it contends that when Irish writers engage with the subject of the Great War, their engagement reverberates in, and revises aspects of, Irish political and cultural history to a greater extent than Fussell’s exploration of “Persistence and Memory” might imply.

In that sense, although this study is concerned with the ways in which the Great War has been imagined in Irish poetry, its subtext is the extent to which those imaginings have themselves struggled with reductive mythologies of history, and have at times become casualties of competing versions of the literary canon. “[P]oetry is fought over...[and] in some sense it fights”, Longley writes in the introduction to *Poetry in the Wars*, and “these arenas overlap”.¹⁷ The work of all six poets discussed here has disrupted various assumptions about Irish history in relation to the Great War; it has also caused, or at least should cause, some canonical confusion in both England and Ireland. Longley’s assertions about poetry here, and her assumption that the First World War has a profound effect on Irish imaginations, have been particularly relevant to this

¹⁵ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 325.

¹⁶ See *The Great War and Modern Memory* 321.

¹⁷ *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 9.

study, as it explores some of the ways in which poetry offers a challenge to reductive perceptions of the Great War, and attempts to elucidate the reasons why the relevance of the Great War to Irish writers has not been consistently, or generally, assumed.

I. The Art of War

Chapter 1



Ireland in the Great War: Literature, History, Culture.

*I have turned my face
To this road before me,
To the deed that I see
And the death I shall die.*

-Padraic Pearse¹

*The road that takes us back from the fight,
The road we love, it is straight and white,
And it runs from the battle, away, away.*

-Patrick MacGill²

I.

The Great War, Alvin Jackson writes, “fully exposed the tensions within Irish politics”. In its aftermath, “historians...compounded these tensions”: they supplied “two distinctive devotional literatures to the two Irish states, and helped to fashion two distinctive iconographical traditions”.³ The Irish experience of the Great War itself has, as a result, been repressed. That repression takes the form either of almost total neglect or of a historical rewriting, and reappraisal, to bolster the competing mythologies which emerged as dominant in Ireland between 1914-18. Those mythologies converge on 1916, with the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. The year is central in both Unionist and Nationalist interpretations of history: it “came to represent a different sort of ‘magic number’ to different types of Irishmen”, and it did so even as “Protestants and Catholics were fighting and dying together on the Western Front”.⁴ Hence, Jackson notes the paradox inherent in Irish history in the Great War era: war “simultaneously

¹ “Renunciation,” *Rogha Dánta: Selected Poems*, ed. Dermot Bolger (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993) 45.

² “The Dawn,” *Soldier Songs, 1917, The Navvy Poet: The Collected Poetry of Patrick MacGill* (Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon, 1984) 95.

³ Alvin Jackson, “Unionist History (I),” *Irish Review* 7 (Autumn 1989): 63.

⁴ *Ibid.* 62.

united and divided the Irish people”.⁵ In that sense, the story of Irish involvement in the Great War is also paradigmatic of his more general assertion that the Irish “are as bound by their history as they are divided by it”.⁶ 1916 did not create divisions in the unified Irish Front in Flanders; it exploited divisions inherent in Irish participation in the war that were apparent, if elided, at its outbreak in 1914. To recognise the contradictions and complexities behind Ireland’s role in the Great War is to go some way towards explaining the psychological incompatibility of, for example, Patrick MacGill and Patrick Pearse, and to begin to understand some of the problems encountered by Irish writers attempting to address the Great War, problems symptomatic of the fact that the confusion which fed into the eventual stalemate of Easter 1916 versus July 1916 - two blood sacrifices demanding their “incompatible due”⁷ - was not allowed, in either version of history, to survive it.⁸

Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, asks us to picture a “situation potent with theatrical possibilities”, the Cabinet meeting of 24 July 1914:

the map of Ireland [was] spread out on the big table. “The fate of nations,” says John Terraine, “appeared to hang upon parish boundaries in the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone.” To them, enter Sir Edward Grey ashen-faced, in his hand the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia: *coup de théâtre*.⁹

At this point, the Irish story, as it exists in English consciousness, comes to a temporary close, shunted off-stage by events of greater magnitude. A.J.P. Taylor writes that “[b]efore the war Ireland had been near to civil conflict”, but that once war against Germany was declared, “[v]irtually all Irishmen rallied enthusiastically to the cause of

⁵ Ibid. 62.

⁶ Ibid. 58.

⁷ Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994) 78.

⁸ As R.F. Foster argues, the “ferment of ideas unleashed in the very early 1900s...might be as easily identified with reconciliation between cultural traditions as with confrontation”, yet the story has too often been read “backwards - over the shoulder, in a sense, across the gulf created by the events of 1914-18”. The “idea of inevitable confrontation” has been brokered through the century. In contrast, Foster, along with other historians, has more recently “queried...the view that cultural diversity is inevitably confrontational” by pointing to some of the more complex and contradictory elements in pre- and post-1916 developments. *Paddy & Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Penguin, 1995) 22-24, 26.

⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) 25.

Belgium”, and “both Roman Catholic and Protestant enlisted in the British army”.¹⁰ Taylor’s is an extremely simplified version of events which assumes that the Irish question could be, and was, put on hold in the face of a greater emergency. It also assumes that enlistment was a straightforward ethical question for all Irishmen, and that factors behind the near civil conflict disappeared literally overnight. In reality, of course, the question could not be indefinitely postponed, or transcended in this way. Instead, Irish involvement in the Great War was, and has remained, a problematical subject precisely because the issue was entangled from the beginning with Irish domestic politics. The bitterly disputed Home Rule Bill was passed in 1914 and placed on the statute book, together with an Act suspending its operation for the duration of the war. It was generally accepted that at the end of the war, some (as yet unspecified) arrangement would have to be made for Ulster Unionists before Home Rule could take effect. In practice, therefore, both sides were left with the potential to gain or lose: the principle of partition had been conceded; the question of borders remained unresolved.

Once war was declared, Redmond volunteered Irish troops for garrison duty in Ireland, with the idea of freeing the British troops for service in France. And, as Brendan Clifford puts it, “the leaders of the Empire were kind to Redmond. They ignored what he said and praised what he did not say....It was pretended that he had made a very different offer [of Irish troops to serve in the B.E.F.] and six weeks later he did.”¹¹ Kitchener, planning his new army, wanted, asked for, and got within a few months, the UVF. As a result, by April 1916 approximately 150,000 Irishmen were on active service with the British Army; F.S.L. Lyons points out that that total, if first and second generation Irishmen living in Britain are added, is in fact much higher - approaching half a million.¹² Yet the war has been, and to some extent still remains, a

¹⁰ A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Penguin, 1966) 146. His reading of the situation here also reverberates in his later suggestion that “[t]here have been periods when Ireland had virtually no history at all”, and that “[t]he moment its history is renewed it becomes yet another chapter in the story of Ireland’s liberation from Great Britain”. “Distressful Country,” rev. of *Political Violence in Ireland*, by Charles Townshend, *Observer* 12 Feb. 1984.

¹¹ Brendan Clifford and Charles James O’Donnell, *Ireland in the Great War: The Irish Insurrection of 1916 Set in its Context of the World War* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1992) 32.

¹² F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939*, 1979 (Oxford: OUP, 1982) 98.

taboo subject in Ireland, marginalised by history in the south and heavily politicised in the north. This is not necessarily to suggest that the majority of volunteers from Ireland in the Great War viewed their participation as being, at the time, in any way more complicated by domestic politics, and hence more confusing, than that of their English counterparts. (If anything, evidence suggests that their approach, in the south of Ireland at least, may be perceived as being more pragmatic and less “politicised” than that of the English or Ulster volunteers.¹³) The pro-Belgium and anti-German propaganda which encouraged enlistment to such a large extent in England in the first months of the war had its effect in Ireland as well. Although the war was seen by a discerning few from an early stage as the most propagandist war in history, the desire to support fellow-Catholics in Belgium and fight for “the freedom of small nations” had an obvious, and largely uncomplicated, appeal for some, as did the desire to protect the British empire against a military aggressor for others.

Yet however uncomplicated their motives might have seemed to the participants in the War, the fact remains that the “cultural legacy” of the war is, as Keith Jeffery notes, “comparatively limited”,¹⁴ the most likely reason being that of extreme cultural confusion existing within the restrictions of the fairly rigid ideologies which came to dominate on either side of the border, and a growing awareness of the gaps opening up between individual motivation, political determinants, and actual combatant experience. This was particularly pertinent in the south of Ireland, where the Irish Volunteer, however straightforward and politically validated his motives might have seemed in

¹³ Bernard Shaw pointed out, when suggesting ways of encouraging recruitment in Ireland, that the trenches were almost certainly a safer place to be than the Dublin slums, and that the wives left behind would receive a separation allowance. “Open Letter, 1918,” *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, vol.2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991) 513. The point is not as flippant as it might sound - it was a consideration to the extent that, when the Easter Rising took place, 250 soldiers’ wives in Enniscorthy complained they were unable to collect their allowance from the Post Office held by the rebels. See Pauline Codd, “Recruiting and Responses to the War in Wexford,” *Ireland and the First World War*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Trinity History Workshop, 1986) 20. Sean O’Casey, in *The Silver Tassie*, parodies the ruthless domestic economics behind enlistment. Mrs Heegan’s first concern, when her son overstays his leave, and it is pointed out to her that “[o]n active service [desertion] means death at dawn” is: “An’ me governmental money grant would stop at once.” vol. 2, *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1949) 18.

¹⁴ Keith Jeffery, “The Great War in Modern Irish Memory,” *Men, Women and War*, ed. T.G.Fraser and Keith Jeffery (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993) 152.

1914, found the goal-posts effectively changed by the 1916 Rising and its aftermath. It was also true, in a different way, for Unionist volunteers in the north, whose actions were politically validated as a demonstration of loyalty to the extent that their personal experience was written out of history. Crucially, in terms of the effect on Irish culture, the confusion in Ireland surrounding the Great War was characterised by a refusal to acknowledge either confusion or illogicality. Instead, those leaders who encouraged Irish participation projected a sense of certainty of purpose (and hence, one assumes, the supposed inevitability of some kind of reward). Those certainties as manifested by Ulster Unionism on the one hand and Redmond's Irish Party on the other were incompatible with each other; they seem, therefore, at this distance, illogical, in that despite their incompatibility they tended towards the same action - Irish participation in "England's" war. They are, in the context of Irish cultural and political history, explicable, but only if the mythology surrounding the "blood-sacrifices" of 1916 is recognised as such, as mythology not history. Almost as soon as Irishmen enlisted in the British Army in 1914, attempts were made to predetermine the roles which their involvement in the war played in Irish affairs; the soldier went to fight, in other words, under a weight of expectation of which he could quite feasibly be oblivious.

Keith Jeffery suggests that, in a sense, the Great War "did not matter to Ireland", that there was "a collective lack of engagement with the conflict".¹⁵ The European stage might have been the stage on which the Irish drama was, in part, played, but the European war itself was not the dominant theme. Churchill proclaimed in a famous speech in 1922:

Great Empires have been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed....The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world. But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.¹⁶

¹⁵ "The Great War in Modern Irish Memory" 152.

¹⁶ Quoted in Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1981) 223.

If England, with its many Imperial responsibilities, was only intermittently concerned with Ireland and Irish affairs, Ireland, as Lyons points out, was always preoccupied with England.¹⁷ Churchill assumed, from a profoundly Anglocentric point of view, that the outbreak of the Great War brought down the curtain on the Irish problem; the war, ironically, came as something of a relief to the British politicians attempting to negotiate a compromise on the Home Rule issue in the summer of 1914. In 1919, from this perspective, the drama began again with the Anglo-Irish war that had been expected in 1914. But for Ireland, the Great War was part of its continuing quarrel; it neither postponed it, nor resolved it, nor, as events in 1916 were to show, suppressed it. In England, Fussell suggests, “the Great War was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future”.¹⁸ It is not conceived, retrospectively, in these terms in Ireland. On the contrary, the war mattered, and matters, to Ireland, not, as for Churchill, or, more generally, English consciousness, because it entailed a break with the past, the destruction of pre-war institutions, but because it played a part in a history whose main themes and “institutions” existed long before the Great War and continued long after it was over.

Ireland’s quarrels were not England’s or Germany’s; they extended beyond the Armistice perhaps to the present day. (In view of the fact that anachronism is a charge consistently brought against Ireland perhaps simply because of its different concerns - Churchill’s comments are only a more extreme example - it is worth noting that the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 changed, but did not resolve the international situation. The “integrity” of certain European quarrels which have persisted throughout the century must surely point up the injustice of Churchill’s irritated criticism of Ireland.) But although the quarrels were different, and the national focus was different, Ireland was not exempt from the militaristic trend of Europe in the pre-war years, or from the cultural factors determining that trend. Britain fought the Great War in defence of the

¹⁷ *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* 16.

¹⁸ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 21.

Pax Britannica, which despite, as she claimed, its virtue in having sustained peace in Europe for one hundred years, was under threat from German *Kultur*, Germany's growing military power, and Germany's potential economic supremacy. The war was therefore conceived, however inaccurately, as an Imperial venture for the sake of "liberty", order and civilisation (a broad claim that accounted, perhaps, for the absence of any more tangible, or at least consistent, war aims). In Germany, Eksteins suggests that the war was "regarded...as the supreme test of spirit, and, as such, a test of vitality, culture and life". It was the outcome of a cultural concern with primitivism and spirituality: war was "a life-giving principle", it was rather paradoxically suggested at the time, and a "steppingstone to a higher plateau of creativity".¹⁹ The attitudes prevalent in 1914 could almost be seen as conducive to casting the conflict in terms of civility and barbarity: as the war progressed both sides cast the other in the role of barbarian and claimed the moral (spiritual) high ground for themselves alone. Developments in Europe pre-1914 tended inevitably towards war (even if in England the war that people expected was an Irish rather than a German one). The common denominators in European culture are also in some ways the most inexplicable factors in the lead up to the Great War, or at least the most difficult to quantify in terms of their importance in bringing about that war: blood-lust for its own sake, the idea that masculinity finds its true and necessary spiritual fulfilment in the shedding of blood, and the desire to turn the principles of (romantic) nationalism developed through the nineteenth century from culture to action.

Events in Ireland followed, or perhaps foreshadowed, European developments: in the 1912 Home Rule crisis, Ulster began preparations for war against the British; Nationalists responded in the south with the formation of the Irish Volunteers. Also, the Republican movement in Ireland moved closer towards the assumption that warfare was both redemptive and necessary in order to validate "genuinely" Irish culture. Ulster Unionism's perception of itself as the outpost of Empire with a civilising mission and a

¹⁹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* 1989 (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1990) 90.

duty to maintain order over troublesome “natives” was counterbalanced by the rise of a cultural nationalism that sought to assert Irish independence through the distinctively “Irish” virtue of spirituality, even irrationality, and was drawn towards violence as a means of making that cultural (national) claim. In a way, Ireland’s conflicting sympathies in the Great War give to the country the appearance of a microcosm of the wider European conflict.

In view of the preparations made by all countries in the years leading up to 1914, and the cultural impetus behind those preparations, there was no real question as to whether war(s) would be fought. The only questions that really remained were those of where, when, with whom, and over what the war(s) would take place.²⁰ In August 1914, it appeared as if everyone was going to fight in the same war, battling against a known opponent, with, for the Allies, at least the illusion of a common purpose. But the peculiarity of the Irish position was such that the illusion could not be sustained, certainly not beyond 1916 when the Easter Rising necessitated a shift in consciousness. The divisions that existed when both Redmondites and Carsonites enlisted in a “common” cause to fight against Germany became all too apparent. Theoretically, both the Ulster and the Irish Volunteers enlisted in loyal support of Britain’s war aims; in reality, the leaders of both sides volunteered their troops in an attempt to influence British policy. The “opponent” in each case, paradoxically, was England; the way to victory over England, whether through the granting or rejection of Home Rule, was perceived as being by means of a competitive and public demonstration of loyalty. The old Irish nationalist cry of “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity” took on an unexpected twist in Redmond’s offer of what turned out to be cannon-fodder to consolidate the Irish Party’s position at Westminster; for Ulster Unionists, England’s difficulty was Ulster’s opportunity to demonstrate how valuable an asset the Province

²⁰ The last point was never really decided at any point either during or after the Great War. As Eksteins points out, Germany’s expansionist war aims did not become anything other than “existential” until the war was well underway. *Rites of Spring* 90. The event which triggered British participation - the invasion of Belgium - became mixed up with colonial expansion, and later, a proclaimed belief in “national self-determination”, the latter aim, Taylor suggests, constructed mainly as a means of encouraging American participation in the war. *The First World War* 161.

was to the Empire, a point which Westminster had been in danger of forgetting. Irish volunteers in the British Army had, therefore, whether they themselves knew it or not, special interests. But, as has been pointed out, the mistake Irish politicians made, which could not have been foreseen by either Carson or Redmond, was that in the Great War, once the nature of trench warfare became apparent, all special interests were expendable.²¹

Redmond, in his recruiting speech, encapsulated most of the 1914 myths about the nature of the war, the future of Ireland, and the purpose of Irish involvement. But the speech is problematical because it also contains within it all the contradictions which would eventually undermine those myths:

The Empire is engaged in the most serious war in history. It is a just war, provoked by the intolerable military despotism of Germany. It is a war for the defence of the sacred rights and liberties of small nations, and the respect and enlargement of the great principle of nationality. Involved in it is the fate of France, our kindred country, the chief nation of that powerful Celtic race to which we belong...

That the Empire could be engaged in a just war was, for some Irish nationalists, a contradiction in terms: James Connolly complained in 1915 that the supposed war for civilisation was in fact "a war upon a nation [Germany] whose chief crime is that it refuses to accept a position of dependence".²² The parallel with Ireland is obvious. Redmond's suggestion that Irish nationalists would be fighting for the *principle* of Irish nationality is not quite the same thing as fighting for the *right* to Irish nationality. Redmond concluded his declaration:

I...appeal to our countrymen of a different creed, and of opposite political opinions, to accept the friendship we have so consistently offered them, to allow this great war, as to which their opinions and ours are the same, to swallow up all the small issues in the domestic government of Ireland which now divide us; that, as our soldiers are going to fight, to shed their blood, and to die at each other's side, in the same army, against the same enemy, and for the same high purpose, their union in the field may lead to a union in

²¹ Gillian McIntosh, "Unionist interpretations of the Battle of the Somme," paper presented to the School of History Staff/Postgraduate seminar, Queen's University, 1994.

²² James Connolly, "A War for Civilisation," *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.3, 730.

their home, and that their blood may be the seal that will bring all Ireland together in one nation, and in liberties equal and common to all.²³

The appeal is potentially, and unconsciously, divisive. The “race to which we belong” is a Celtic and Catholic one. Ulster Protestants are not part of that “race”; they are also cast as the guilty party, since they have refused “friendship”. Not only that, the issues which have presumably led them to refuse that friendship are small domestic issues, doubtless deserving of Churchill’s post-war impatience. The belief that Irish blood-shedding overseas would unite a divided country was put forward at different times by both north and south. Lt.Col.H.C.Bernard, after the Battle of the Somme, thought that “[t]he Ulster and the Irish divisions, shoulder to shoulder in France, should consolidate the home front afterwards, despite the Easter Rebellion”.²⁴ The myth perpetuated, that Protestants and Catholics, by dying together, could somehow resolve the Irish question (a myth which also assumed, inaccurately, that they were dying “for the same high purpose”) never reached beyond this assertion to offer any viable grounds for the belief; the reality, of course, was that dying together on the fields of Flanders was not quite the same as living together: it is, as Charles Sorley puts it, “easy to be dead”.²⁵ And as Keith Jeffery points out, “the sombre truth remains that the nationalist and unionist Irish casualties of the Great War became more divided in death than they had ever been in life”.²⁶ (The reminder that both Catholic and Protestant gave their lives in the war is still put forward in the hope that it might, of itself, bridge political divides.)

The loyalist rhetoric concerning the outbreak of war is also stimulated by the desire to perpetuate cultural myths, but, ironically, although it appears to be more

²³ John Redmond “Declaration issued by Mr Redmond on behalf of the Irish Party,” 17 Sept. 1914, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.2, 345.

²⁴ Quoted in Tom Johnstone, *Orange, Green and Khaki: The Story of the Irish Regiments in the Great War 1914-18* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992) 236.

²⁵ Charles Sorley, “When you see millions of the mouthless dead,” *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. Jon Silkin, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1981) 89. The united front abroad is itself partly myth: Jennifer Johnston’s *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, 1974 (London: Penguin, 1988), shows two Irish soldiers of different classes and creeds unable to sustain in life a friendship that is under attack from the same bigotries in Flanders that existed in Ireland. There is, in the novel, a certain inevitability about their deaths if they are to cross the boundaries which, in life, remain rigidly fixed whatever the geographical context.

²⁶ “The Great War in Modern Irish Memory” 153.

inconsistent and contradictory in the light of previous events,²⁷ it is probably less so. Germany's hope in 1914 that England might be too preoccupied with war in Ulster to honour its obligations to the Entente Cordiale, failed to recognise that Ulster loyalism is what it proclaims to be - loyalty to the British Empire. To prepare to fight the British army and resist Home Rule indicated, from the Unionist perspective, a loyalty to the concept of Empire over and above loyalty to a British, not an Imperial, parliament; to then support British (Imperial) war aims, aims which had little to do with the principle of nationality, was not an alteration of that position but a reaffirmation of it: as the *Belfast Newsletter* proclaimed, not entirely accurately, in 1914, "nowhere in the United Kingdom was the call of Empire more loyally, cheerfully and generously answered than in Ulster; nowhere throughout the far-flung dominions of the King did men rally to the colours with greater promptitude than in the Northern province".²⁸ Redmond stated that "[t]he democracy of Great Britain listened to our appeal, and have kept faith with Ireland", therefore "[i]t is now a duty of honour for Ireland to keep faith with them".²⁹ For Ulster Unionists, on the other hand, betrayed, as they saw it, by those constitutional politics, the concern was not with Westminster but with the broader concepts of King and Empire, the same concepts that sustained Unionism throughout the Home Rule crisis.

II.

Ironically, the instability of Redmond's rhetoric in 1914 and the apparent stability of Ulster Unionism's (both of which were in direct contrast to the actual feelings of the parties at that time) became the factors which dominated, and in some ways still dominate, memory of the war in Ireland. Partly they did so because of the huge impact of the 1916 Easter Rising, which exposed flaws in the Redmondite position as it

²⁷ Ulster's preparations, in the months preceding the war, for conflict between the British army and the UVF, followed by the enlistment of the UVF in the British army.

²⁸ "Ulster Volunteers Review of the Year," *Belfast Newsletter* 26 December 1914: 7.

²⁹ "Declaration issued by Mr Redmond on behalf of the Irish Party," *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.2, 345.

simultaneously hardened the Unionist one.³⁰ Ireland does not have an anthologised or canonised tradition of Great War literature; the opposite holds true for the Easter Rising. The aesthetic canon is closely allied with the victorious political one: it is difficult to imagine that “the 1916 poets” could mean anyone other than the 1916 rebels, or that any Irish poet on the Western Front in 1916 could usurp the title. In the context of the Great War, the Easter Rising literature requires consideration not only because it is the offshoot of a political movement that opposed Redmond’s enlistment policy and in doing so was seen to have pushed Ireland further towards independence, but also because it enables understanding of the unique problems encountered by Irishmen both Catholic and Protestant regarding the experience of the First World War.

The Easter Rising in Dublin captured the imagination of what was to become the Irish Free State in the same way patriotism captured English and German imaginations in and before 1914. It succeeded in doing so in spite of, or perhaps because of, its relatively small death toll in comparison with events at the Verdun and the Somme in the same year. The testimony of an Irish soldier serving in the British Army suggests the potentially enormous impact the Rising could have on perceptions of the Great War:

I went to the war for no other reason than I wanted to see what war was like, to get a gun, to see new countries, and to feel a grown man. Above all I went because I knew no Irish history and had no national consciousness....Thus through the blood sacrifices of the men of 1916, had one Irish youth of eighteen been awakened to Irish Nationality. Let it also be recorded that those sacrifices were equally *necessary* to awaken the minds of ninety per cent of the Irish people.³¹

The desires which led to his enlistment in the British Army were, he implies, fundamentally natural desires, but in the end they found their outlet not just in any war, but in a battle (of sorts) which invoked nationalist rather than simply national feeling. The Rising, in a way, put the supposedly misguided spirit of Ireland back on track, and

³⁰ Although it should also be noted that, as Paul Bew has argued, the Sinn Féin position was no less flawed than the Irish party one, even though Sinn Féin outmanoeuvred the Irish party in elections after the Rising. Bew describes Sinn Féin’s line on Ulster as “wildly inconsistent”. See Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland 1890-1910: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 219.

³¹ Tom Barry quoted in W.I.Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, Easter 1916* (New York: OUP, 1967) 105.

harnessed those impulses of romantic nationalism that could not find fulfilment in the Great War. The sense that Redmond took the wrong road, failed in some way to understand Irish national identity and aspiration, received concrete expression after the Rising.³² Roger Casement, in the dock, pointed the “irrationality” of the Redmondite position

We have been told, have been asked to hope, that after this war Ireland will get Home Rule as a reward for the life-blood shed in a cause which, whoever else its success may benefit, can surely not benefit Ireland....Home Rule, when it comes, if come it does, will find Ireland drained of all that is vital to its very existence, unless it be that unquenchable hope that we build on the graves of the dead. We are told that if Irishmen go by the thousands to die *not* for Ireland, but for Flanders, for Belgium...they were winning self-government for Ireland. [*sic*] But if they dare to lay down their lives on their native soil, if they dare to dream even that freedom can be won only at home by men resolved to fight for it there, then they are traitors to their country.

But history is not so recorded in other lands. In Ireland alone, in this twentieth century, is loyalty held to be a crime.³³

For Pearse, one of the perpetrators of that “crime”, there is no doubt that he shared in the “terrible readiness, indeed a thirst, for what Yeats was to call ‘the blood-dimmed tide’”.³⁴ “[B]loodshed”, he wrote, “is a cleansing and satisfying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood”.³⁵ And as Lyons points out, with the outbreak of war in Europe, “whatever fires burned beneath the surface of his mind before 1914...erupted almost uncontrollably”:

The last six months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe...It is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the

³² It is a view that became something of a commonplace, although it also depends on, in Foster’s phrase, “reading the story backwards”. *Paddy & Mr Punch* 23. In contrast to this view, Paul Bew has persuasively argued that “[f]ar from being cut off from the people, the Irish party echoed their concerns all too accurately”, that “it seems more reasonable to see the party as shot through by the same ambiguities and complexities which afflicted the people”. Its electoral demise, he suggests, stems not from the fact that Redmond missed the point before 1916, but that the key issue *after* 1916 was seen to be that of Ireland’s right to nationhood rather than agrarian radicalism, and that having outflanked the Irish party on this issue, as the Easter Rising executions gave “legitimacy to a new challenge to the Irish party”, Sinn Féin was then able, even if without consistency in policy, or new objectives, to outflank it on the others. See Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland* 210-11, 212-14.

³³ “Speech from the Dock, 1916,” *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.2, 299.

³⁴ George Steiner, quoted in Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* 91.

³⁵ Patrick Pearse, quoted in Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* 90.

earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields. Such august homage was never offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country.³⁶

That Pearse is often compared with Rupert Brooke, glorifying the pouring out of “the red / Sweet wine of youth”, indicates if nothing else a similarity of national impulses between Ireland, England, or Germany, where patriotism was seen to be vindicated through bloodshed, and when the enormous appeal of “immortality” had not yet collapsed in the face of experience.³⁷ Pearse took the ideas of heroism and sacrifice out of the hands of the Irish Party, projected onto them a different meaning, and placed them firmly in Dublin, not on the Western Front.

On Easter Monday 1916, a few hundred rebels occupied key buildings in Dublin (and elsewhere) and proclaimed from the steps of the Post Office to a largely indifferent crowd that Ireland was now a republic. After a week of fighting, the rebels surrendered to the British Army, and most of the leaders were subsequently executed by firing squad. As insurrections go, it was not what one would call a military success. Initially, in fact, it did not appear to be any kind of success at all. Yet the fact that the execution of the rebels came to have a much greater imaginative impact in Ireland than the deaths of thousands in the Great War; the fact that the Rising, with its relatively few casualties and obvious failure of intent, acted as a catalyst for subsequent events in history that led to the marginalisation of the Great War experience, indicates not failure but a high level of success. It indicates that Pearse, whilst sharing the impulses of sacrifice and heroism prevalent in Europe, also understood the sort of context in which those impulses could be given free rein; that context was not the battlefields of France, where heroism itself died a death, where mechanised slaughter devalued human life to the extent that everyone was expendable, and where the sheer scale of atrocity rendered individual sacrifice futile.

W.I.Thompson, in *The Imagination of an Insurrection*, suggests that Pearse’s self-image as Jesus Christ (crossed with Cuchullainn) “demands the one action that can

³⁶ Ibid. 91-92.

³⁷ Edna Longley notes the comparison between the two mind-sets. “The Rising, the Somme and Irish Memory,” *The Living Stream* 78.

express it”, hence, “[t]he mythical image of Pearse as savior demanded the reality of crucifixion”.³⁸ It is not known whether the rebels went out on Easter Monday 1916 in anticipation of success or in sure knowledge of failure. The writings of Pearse indicate a desire for martyrdom, and that desire is incompatible with the notion of military success: Thompson suggests that he “decided that his death was not the cost but the reward of sacrifice”.³⁹ But whether or not Pearse rebelled in certain knowledge of military failure, he also did so with an understanding that from small-scale revolutionary action, in which the rebel’s death can raise him to heroic stature if only because the odds are stacked against him, the imagination of the people can, after the event, be awakened to revolutionary fervour. In “The Mother”, written shortly before his execution, he anticipates the success through failure that will follow upon his death and dictates the terms of remembrance:

....I do not grudge
My two strong sons that I have seen go out
To break their strength and die, they and a few,
In bloody protest for a glorious thing,
They shall be spoken of among their people,
The generations shall remember them,
And call them blessed...⁴⁰

The Rising was blood sacrifice, but it was a sacrifice which in acknowledging and accepting the futility of the gesture overcame futility in the very act of making the gesture. In doing so, the imagination had a role to play on a scale beyond that possible in, for example, the England of 1916, where the poet was limited by the urgent need to counterbalance somewhat imaginative journalism and propaganda with a note of sanity. Notes of sanity do not resound very loudly in much of the Easter Rising literature contemporaneous with the event. Thompson explains that:

If one values life, the rebels with their Republic of Ireland were insane fanatics who had no understanding of reality; if one values death, then the realistic critics of the fanatics were men of limited vision: standing squarely

³⁸ *The Imagination of an Insurrection* 118.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 122.

⁴⁰ *Selected Poems* 28.

upon reality they made sensible speeches without realizing that it was precisely reality that the revolutionaries had pulled out from under them.⁴¹

Effectively, Pearse, MacDonagh and Plunkett (amongst others) imagined an event into existence. Eventually, history caught up with that imagined version of events: however indifferent the response to Pearse's Proclamation of the Irish Republic, the tide of public opinion turned in his favour during and after the executions, and it is Easter 1916 that unleashes Muses in some unlikely places.

Francis Ledwidge, Tom Kettle, and Monk Gibbon are classic examples of the shift in consciousness, the "awakening", that the Rising provokes. Alice Curtayne writes of Francis Ledwidge that "he never saw anything in war but waste and futility" and "tended to recoil from it even in his verse".⁴² In 1917, he still proposed the standard arguments to explain his enlistment in the British Army: "is not every honour won by Irishmen on the battlefields of the world Ireland's honour, and does it not tend to the glory and delight of her posterity?"⁴³ But although for Ledwidge the question is rhetorical, with hindsight he was right to pose it as a question, since subsequent events in Ireland undermined the sentiment.⁴⁴ In some ways, memory has followed the pattern James Connolly anticipated in 1915 (although the nationalist rather than the working class struggle displaced the Great War): "Some of our class have fought in Flanders and the Dardanelles; the greatest achievement of them all combined will weigh but a feather in the balance for good compared with the achievements of those who stayed at home and fought to secure the rights of the working class against invasion."⁴⁵ The

⁴¹ *The Imagination of an Insurrection* 117.

⁴² Alice Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet (1887-1917)* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe, 1972) 164.

⁴³ Francis Ledwidge, "To Katherine Tynan," 19 June 1917, quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet* 183.

⁴⁴ The problems surrounding the Irish National War Memorial are a case in point. After considerable debate, the proposed location for the memorial was changed from central Dublin to Merrion Square, to Phoenix Park, and finally to Islandbridge, where it was, as Keith Jeffery points out, "removed from the centre of attention", "The Great War in Modern Irish Memory," *Men, Women and War* 152. Jane Leonard described the memorial in 1986 as being in a "sorry state" of "neglect and desecration" which "symbolises the persistent indifference to the War" and indicates a desire on the part of successive administrations to "guard the people from historical awareness lest they remember too much" "Lest We Forget: Irish War Memorials," *Ireland and the First World War* ed. David Fitzpatrick, 67.

⁴⁵ James Connolly, "A War for Civilisation," *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.3, 730.

contradiction Ledwidge, Kettle, and Gibbon sensed in their positions as soldiers in the British Army and Irish writers sympathetic to the nationalist cause is indicative of the problem of memory encountered in Ireland, a problem anticipated at the time. Tom Kettle, a former Home Rule MP killed on the Somme in 1916, remarked with some bitterness (and accuracy) after the Easter Rising: "These men will go down in history as heroes and martyrs, and I will go down - if I go down at all - as a bloody British officer".⁴⁶ Ledwidge joined the British Army, he said, "because...I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions".⁴⁷ But he was obsessed not by the Great War, as were so many English soldier poets, but by Easter 1916,⁴⁸ writing twenty poems on the subject of the insurrection, including the poem for which he is best remembered, "Thomas MacDonagh", a poem which Heaney calls the most "perfect...realization of his gifts".⁴⁹ (One can also argue that it is an elegy for the dead of the Great War, although that inference is based only on mood and tone.) Significantly, there are no poems by Ledwidge directly about the Great War to equal his Easter Rising poems in stature: if he links himself with the mood of the people, and the rebels, it seems he can do so only at the cost of denying the path he chose for himself. For Monk Gibbon, one of the few Irish Great War memoirists, his role in suppressing the Rising caused a change in sympathy that subsequently made his position as an officer on the Western Front untenable.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Quoted in J.B. Lyons, *The Enigma of Tom Kettle* (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1983) 293.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet* 83.

⁴⁸ "I...am not without hope", Ledwidge wrote in June 1917, "that a new Ireland will rise from her ashes in the ruins of Dublin, like the Phoenix, with one purpose, one aim, and one ambition. I tell you this in order that you may know what it is to me to be called a British soldier while my country has no place amongst the nations but the place of Cinderella". Quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet* 180.

⁴⁹ Introduction, *Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems*, ed. Dermot Bolger (Dublin: New Island Books, 1992) 19.

⁵⁰ Monk Gibbon, from an "ardently unionist" family, on leave in Ireland when the Rising took place, served for Easter week in the barracks in Dublin and was commended by his superiors for his part in quelling the Rising. He served for 18 months, behind the lines, in France, sent a letter of resignation on the grounds that he objected to killing, later entered hospital with shell-shock, and was subsequently deemed fit only for home service. The Easter Rising was the point where Gibbon interrogated the rights and wrongs of war, and questioned his loyalties: in suppressing the Rising, he felt that "the sympathies of all parts of Dublin...were on our side. There were too many Dubliners fighting with Irish Regiments...for the population to feel that this was the right moment to embarrass England." His own sympathies, however, after the murder of Sheehy-Skeffington, were,

Irish Republicanism has tended, understandably, to want to forget that Irish nationalists fought in the army which executed the 1916 rebels. What characterises Kettle's attitude, and, to a lesser extent, Ledwidge's, is bitterness, a recognition that although they and the Easter 1916 rebels might have been driven by similar motives, this does not heal a division - which also incorporates a judgement - between those who chose the "right" action, and those who did not. For the soldiers who chose to enlist in the Great War under the impression that this was the best action to take on the road to Irish independence, the Easter Rising "proved" what its protagonists had always believed: the fallaciousness of that choice. In the changes wrought in Ireland by the Rising, and the Civil War, Ireland's Great War soldiers became, at best, only the incidental casualties of history. That judgement has remained implicit even in some well-intentioned attempts at commemorative inclusiveness. A commemorative statue and plaque were erected in honour of Tom Kettle in St Stephen's Green, but the tribute was delayed for over twenty years, one of the reasons for the delay being an objection by the Commissioners of Public Works to the phrase "Killed in France".⁵¹ AE's poem, "To the Memory of Some I Knew who are Dead and who Loved Ireland", lamenting the deaths of MacDonagh and Kettle, which appeared in the *Irish Times* in December 1917, is, F.S.L. Lyons points out, "the only major utterance of that time to mourn the death both of those who fell in the Rising and those who fell on the western front".⁵² Equally significant is its failure to do so successfully. The first stanza, for MacDonagh, fails, unlike Yeats's "Easter 1916", to balance lament and judgement, "[h]igh words" and a "high fate" dwindling to the banal "You paid the price: You paid the price", a cliché

ironically, probably "amongst the very first to be transferred in some small measure to Sinn Féin". *Inglorious Soldier* (London: Hutchinson, 1968) 31-32.

⁵¹ See J.B. Lyons, *The Enigma of Tom Kettle* 305-06. The objections, Lyons notes, "astonished Kettle's friends, who never envisaged the occasion as a political one, and offended his relatives..." 305-6. In the end, the epitaph used was from one of Kettle's own poems, a sonnet written in 1916, and the choice brilliantly combines moral certainty with historical ambiguity: "Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor, / But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed / And for the secret scripture of the poor." Quoted in Lyons, *The Enigma of Tom Kettle* 300.

⁵² *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* 107. The poem is also quoted here, 107-8. Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) reiterates Lyons's observations, describing the poem as the "only significant poem of the time to lament the Irishmen who died in both conflicts" 240.

which falls flat the first time, and does not redeem itself by repetition. Since there are any number of uninspired Easter Rising poems, its interest now lies in what it says about Kettle. To attempt a commemoration of Kettle which locates his death on the battlefields of France is to run counter to the spirit of the times. AE's poem, though well-intentioned, does not rise to the challenge it sets itself, indulging in conventional euphemisms - "You proved by death as true as they, / In mightier conflicts played your part" - that are also historically ambiguous. Nowhere does he throw a spanner in the works equivalent to Yeats's "For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said" in "Easter 1916". In a way, AE applies Easter 1916 myths of victory through death and defeat to the First World War. Kettle's own war poems, though equally slight, do point the difference between the mentality of Irish soldiers in the British army and the Easter 1916 rebels, that the former did not work on the assumption that wanton sacrifice meant future victory, rather it was simply a wasted expenditure of life: "The trumpets summon death, and Ireland rallies - / Tool or free? We have paid, and over paid, the price."⁵³ More recently, Sean Lemass's tribute, in 1966, to the Republic's Great War soldiers was also, unintentionally, not without a slight sting in the tail: "it was common - and I also was guilty in this respect - to question the motives of those men who joined the new British armies at the outbreak of the war, but it must, in their honour, and in fairness to their memory, be said that they were motivated by the highest purpose...".⁵⁴ By implication, their intentions were pure even though they were wrong, not perhaps the greatest tribute.

Despite the recent resurgence of interest in Irish involvement in the Great War (of which more anon), inclusiveness can still be an elusive goal. Declan Kiberd's recent *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation*, acknowledges the prevailing *zeitgeist* by including a chapter on "The Great War and Irish Memory", but then falls into, rather than challenges, the reductive mythologies that have dominated memory. "For decades after independence", he writes, "the 150,000 Irish who fought in the Great

⁵³ Tom Kettle, "A Nation's Freedom," *Poems and Parodies* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1916) 82.

⁵⁴ Quoted in J.B. Lyons, *The Enigma of Tom Kettle* 306-07.

War...had been officially extirpated from the record". "Such amnesia", he suggests, "was weird...considering the manifest links of mood and mentality between the Easter rebels and the battlers at the Somme".⁵⁵ But two problems arise here: first, Kiberd considers only those who fought "for the rights of small nations and for Home Rule"; second, he misses the point that the Irish Party's commitment to a democratic rather than insurrectionary path heightened rather than healed the sense of division after the Rising.⁵⁶ When Kiberd notes the sympathy many Irish soldiers in the British army would have felt for the rebels, and then describes that feeling as causing "confusion",⁵⁷ he confuses sympathy with overt support or involvement, and inadvertently finds the reasons for the "amnesia" he describes as "weird". The sympathy goes hand in hand, as Kettle was aware, with exclusion: one action validates itself by invalidating another.⁵⁸ To link mood and mentality entails some impossible manipulation of time and space. In an attempt at inclusiveness, Kiberd writes: "[t]he rebels emulated the demeanour of the British Army and proved that, in an issue which truly engaged their sympathies, they could be as brave as any. Accordingly, the soldier-poet Francis Ledwidge found no great difficulty in writing a lament for his friend Thomas MacDonagh...".⁵⁹ But he reverses and thereby ignores the true difficulty of memory in order to find it surmountable: one would look in vain, in other words, for a Sinn Féiner poem lauding the achievements of the British army on the Western Front. Nor does he offer any explanation for the absence of the Great War in Ledwidge's own verse. (The real point of such remarks seems to be to rescue the rebels from any imputation of cowardice.) In effect, he tries to redress amnesia by suggesting that the Great War was rather like the Easter Rising and that therefore there is no need to be amnesic about it.⁶⁰ In doing so,

⁵⁵ *Inventing Ireland* 239.

⁵⁶ Tom Dooley discusses the ways in which the Great War actually "crystallised differences between the two nationalist traditions". "Southern Ireland, Historians and the First World War," *Irish Studies Review* 4 (Autumn 1993): 5.

⁵⁷ *Inventing Ireland* 239.

⁵⁸ Kettle's embittered recognition that the Rising undermined his own efforts did not prevent a highly emotional reaction to it that was also, because of his relation by marriage to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, extremely personal.

⁵⁹ *Inventing Ireland* 239.

⁶⁰ Kiberd's understanding of the Great War in *Inventing Ireland* is based on an often inaccurate paraphrasing of some of Fussell's ideas in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a study,

he not only elides the problem of memory by privileging the Easter 1916 origin myth he purports to confront, he also writes out of Irish history those soldiers who fought in defence of, rather than in reaction against, Imperial ideology.

III.

Less than three months after the Easter Rising, the Ulster Division was decimated on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The casualties numbered approximately 6000, of whom 2000 were killed. Ulster, with ten percent of the entire British casualties, rated second only to Yorkshire as the region which suffered the most on that day. Of the nine VC's awarded on 1 July 1916, four were given to the 36th "Ulster" Division. Yet although, for the Ulster Unionists, remembering the Great War means, in effect, remembering the Somme, that remembrance has been perhaps even more problematical, because it has been so prominent, than elsewhere in Ireland.

The Ulster Division was, in many ways, unique within the British Army. Carson's request, that the UVF remain together in one Division, had, unlike Redmond's similar request regarding the Irish Volunteers, been granted. Battalions from the UVF were transferred with little, if any, alteration, into the new 36th Division, and, as Tom Johnston points out, "[b]ecause the infantry structure of the Division was based on the Ulster Volunteer Force, it was highly localised. Belfast streets, town districts or little villages provided whole platoons in a way which made them enlarged families."⁶¹ The division was also largely Protestant and Unionist in nature: although it has been

incidentally, in which Fussell explicitly states that he "largely disregards events in...Ireland" ix. In order to make the comparison between "the myths surrounding 1916 and the Somme" Kiberd fails to distinguish between English and Irish war myths, fails, in some ways, to understand the English war myths he uses: the "lost generation" in England refers as much to those who survived the war, and for which the only equivalent that could be found in Ireland would be the generation who are significantly "lost" at the end of his chapter - the Irish soldiers who survived, not the Easter rebels who did not. See *Inventing Ireland* 247. Even if there is a basis for comparison between the English myths which enabled the Battle of the Somme and the Republican ones which led to the Rising, it does not shed much light on the complexities of Irish involvement in the war. Rather, it implies that English Somme myths and Irish Rising myths will, if suitably conflated, offer a bizarre means of redressing the neglect of Ireland's Great War soldiers. See also note 87 below.

⁶¹ *Orange, Green and Khaki* 220.

suggested, probably inaccurately, that it contained no Catholics, the number would certainly have been negligible. Cyril Falls, in his history of the 36th Division, picks up on the religious element as a major factor in the life of the Division: "Religious feeling inspired the men of Ulster in those days of training, and remained with them in the days of war."⁶² The 36th Division was the pride of the "Imperial Province" of Ulster - "Resolution, self-reliance, and the spirit that knows no surrender and no defeat are present in full measure in every unit of the Division"⁶³ - and it became the focus for the allegiance formerly given to the UVF. Its Unionist/Protestant nature meant that any feats performed by the Division were recognisably Ulster Protestant feats and could be claimed as such in Unionist mythology: if Ulster Volunteers entered the war with the hope that recognition of their "sacrifice" would give them political leverage, they appeared to start with an advantage over the Irish Volunteers. But two things resisted easy incorporation into Unionist mythology, and led to the wide gap which opened between experience and ideology. The first was the nature of the Great War itself; the second was the apparent advantage of the nature of the Division. As Tom Johnston points out, there is one fairly obvious problem which results from the organisation of a division like the 36th on local lines: "When a unit recruited heavily from the same sparsely populated rural area suffers severe battle casualties, the instant effect on a small community is terrible. But in the heady atmosphere of 1914, this possibility was in the future and not then a consideration."⁶⁴ The appalling casualties suffered by the Ulster Division on 1 July 1916 seemed to throw most of Ulster into mourning; the soldiers themselves saw relatives, life-long friends, and neighbours killed or wounded at the Front.

Martin Middlebrook suggests that the Battle of the Somme was lost "in a matter of seconds - the interval between the lifting of the artillery barrage and the arrival of the first wave at the German trenches" - an interval which allowed time for the Germans to

⁶² Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division*, 1922 (Belfast: The Somme Association, 1991) 16.

⁶³ "Order of the Day" issued by Sir General Nugent to the Ulster Division on 29 June 1916, quoted in *The Northern Whig* 6 July 1916: 8

⁶⁴ *Orange, Green and Khaki* 220.

lift their guns from the deep dug-outs in which they had been largely protected from the British artillery barrage, and simply fire into the waves of British troops advancing across No Man's Land. It was an unimaginative plan, one which was to prove lethal for over 20,000 people, and it "refused to credit [the] troops with having any skill and robbed them of all chance to use their initiative".⁶⁵ The Ulster Division's experience of the opening of battle differed only slightly from this plan, but, as events were to show, crucially. If the battle was lost in that interval Middlebrook describes, it was also the point for the 36th Division where it was won: they left the trenches a few moments before the time scheduled for the first wave of troops, they advanced at speed - often running rather than walking - over No Man's Land, in part under cover of Thiepval wood, and arrived at the first line of German trenches almost before the Germans had time to respond. But the Division's success was not matched by comparable achievements on either flank: the Ulstermen therefore penetrated further and further into the German lines, a process which left them exposed on three sides to enemy fire, and failed to receive reinforcements in sufficient time to consolidate their gains. Many of the casualties were suffered on a slow and painful retreat at the end of the day back across the ground gained at such high cost in the morning. As Brian Gardner points out: "They were confused. They thought they had won a costly victory. But it had turned out something like defeat." Writing in 1968, he also suggested that "[t]here is bad feeling about this in Ulster to this day, many survivors believing they were let down by English divisions on their flanks".⁶⁶ The Ulster Division showed great initiative and skill, but did so in a context which appeared not to value those qualities at all.

The Somme was in many ways the turning point for English culture and modern memory: the ideals of 1914, sustainable through the first two years of war, could not be sustained after the experience of that battle. Derek Mahon calls the English generation of 1916 "dumbfounded on the Somme". In a way he is right: the "old phrases" that, as

⁶⁵ Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London: Allen Lane, 1971) 280-81.

⁶⁶ Brian Gardner, *The Big Push: the Somme 1916* (London: Sphere Books, 1968) 90.

Edward Thomas points out, “come back alive in war-time”,⁶⁷ no longer seemed adequate after 1916. A new voice appeared in post-1916 English war literature - not the voice of heroic sacrifice for a good cause, but one of irony, anger and frustration. In Ulster, disillusionment with the war came, as it did for England, on the Somme in 1916, but, for various reasons, it was without a focus and even without a voice. There is no fiction from this time which deals with the Unionist experience on the Somme;⁶⁸ there is no poetry, with the exception of a small quantity of ephemeral verse.⁶⁹ In a way, this is astonishing: thousands dead, a culture in turmoil, anger and bitterness against the war, widespread grief, political insecurity, and yet, on the whole, no cultural, or even, one might say, unofficial record of this from the community concerned.

Understanding of the First World War in England depends a great deal on, or, from another perspective, is dictated by, the literary efforts both during and after the war of those who actually took part in it. The extent to which Paul Fussell relies on these sources as a means of understanding modern memory is indicative of the phenomenon of a “literary war”. The official histories, and pamphlets, the popular, propagandist literature and so forth, published under the restrictions of the Defence of the Realm Act, and guaranteed not to offend conservative sensibilities, are no longer held to tell the “truth” about war: the crucial and canonical texts for understanding the English experience of the Great War have become war memoirs by Graves, Sassoon, Blunden, and others, or the trench lyrics of Owen, Rosenberg or Sassoon. In Ulster, although a flood of books appeared in the war and immediate post-war years about the Ulster Division at the Somme, these were, on the whole, by Unionist politicians and

⁶⁷ *A Language Not to be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, ed. Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981) 222.

⁶⁸ Keith Jeffery, in his survey of Irish fiction of the First World War notes that he “found nothing in fiction about the response of loyalist Ulster to the conflict”, although Ulster is “well-served” in non-fiction. “Irish Prose Writers of the First World War,” *Modern Irish Writers and the Wars*, ed. Kathleen Devine (Colin Smythe: forthcoming). I am grateful to Keith Jeffery for allowing me sight of this paper before publication.

⁶⁹ One soldier who served with the Division (not previously a UVF member), Harry Midgely, published a volume of poems, *Thoughts from Flanders*, in 1924. On the whole the verse reiterates 1914-style patriotic ideals of death and glory, and looks forward to a glorious future raised from the ashes of war. Several poems, some by those serving in the army, appeared in newspapers in Ulster in the weeks after 1 July. Examples of ephemeral verse published in Ulster in 1914 and 1916 are given in Appendix A.

historians, often with an agenda that sought not to remember the Somme but to dictate the way in which the Somme should be remembered. The Somme was incorporated into a seamless thread of Unionist history's military successes, a history of loyalty to the Crown and to Protestantism stretching from the Battle of the Boyne through to 1916 (and beyond).⁷⁰ Cyril Falls strikes a remarkably positive note in his description of the men of the Ulster Division eleven days after the battle:

Sun was shining on the old Flemish village. Officers and men wore marigolds in caps to honour the day [12 July]; the bands played "King William's March." The least practised eye could tell that to these men confidence was returning; that the worst of the horror they had endured had been shaken from their shoulders. They marched like victors, as was their right.⁷¹

Positively unbelievable perhaps, especially when compared with an alternative view of men after battle presented by Siegfried Sassoon: "shambling, limping, straggling and out of step....with an almost spectral appearance."⁷² In *The Great War: A Tribute to Ulster's Heroes*, a commemorative book published by the Citizen's Committee in Belfast in 1919 (and impressively subtitled *Ulster Greets her Brave and Faithful Sons and Remembers her Glorious Dead*) comparatively little space is devoted to the Battle of the Somme, which is surprising when one considers that it is the only major battle in

⁷⁰ First and foremost amongst these texts is, of course, Cyril Falls's *History of the 36th (Ulster) Division*, first published in 1922. Other examples are Ronald McNeill, *Ulster's Stand for Union* (London: John Murray, 1922), in which he affirms the reliability of Ulster, her willingness to make sacrifices on a huge scale for England (demonstrated at the Somme), as against the possibly well-intentioned, but fundamentally untrustworthy and unreliable Redmondites. See Chapter XX, "Ulster in the War," 229-39. Even less balanced is Ernest W. Hamilton's *The Soul of Ulster*, 2nd ed. (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1917), which describes the Ulster Protestant's "resolution" and "courage" as "unshakeable"; the "curse of [Catholic] Ireland", on the other hand, is "lack of moral courage". 138, 149. In a bitter castigation of the Easter 1916 rebels, he ridicules what he sees as their "claim" that there is "no ethical difference between the killing of a hundred enemy soldiers in battle and the killing of a hundred enemy neighbours in cold blood", and suggests that the rebels opted for the latter "as the safer and therefore the preferable course" 168-69. Some years later, C.J. O'Donnell published *Outraged Ulster: Why Ireland is Rebellious, by An Ulster Catholic* (London: Anglo-Eastern Publishing Co. Ltd., 1932), a violent protest against the Ulster Protestant treatment of Catholics in the north of Ireland who had, he states, "believed in the righteousness of the war...waged for the freedom of a small and wronged nation", had fought for England, and thereby demonstrated their loyalty (he points out that five full regiments were raised from the Catholic population of Belfast) their only reward to be persecuted and, in some cases, driven out of Belfast by Protestant violence. 53-54. It is not a perspective which has reverberated to any degree in Protestant-dominated commemoration of the war.

⁷¹ *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* 63.

⁷² *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, 1937 (London: Faber, 1972) 362.

which the original division, with its overwhelmingly Protestant character, took part,⁷³ and the emphasis, as with Falls's history, is laid on the fact that the Ulster Division fulfilled all its obligations in the battle, not on the heavy price it paid in doing so, or on the negligible effect this huge expenditure of human life actually had on the course of the war. Falls, in fact, incorporates a little dig at the rest of the British Army into his history when lauding the achievements of the 36th Division: "...in all that had happened there was no reproach for them. They, at least, had accomplished their task in the face of incredible difficulties."⁷⁴ Other myths have been perpetuated to the extent that they now appear, in one form or another, in almost every history of the Battle of the Somme: the Ulstermen, aware that 1 July was the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne,⁷⁵ leapt out of their trenches wearing Orange sashes and shouting "No Surrender!", "Remember the Boyne!". Like most First World War myths, this one probably contains an element of truth, but has been grossly exaggerated by those seeking to incorporate the Somme into an unbroken thread of Unionist history. Malcolm McKee, a veteran of the War, challenged those myths in an article for the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1966:

What nonsense is stuck onto the story...Certainly Major Gaffikin waved an Orange handkerchief, but orange was the colour of our battalion...If he had said (and if anybody could have heard him) "Come on, boys, this is the First of July!" - how many would have known the Boyne was fought on the first of July? I don't know why they plaster such incidents on our battle. Nothing was further from my mind than the Boyne on the Somme.⁷⁶

History, he complains, has denied the truth of his experience. To find that truth, it is necessary to shatter the "memories" that have dominated in Ulster since the battle took place. It is not a task that could have been undertaken fifty years earlier: as Philip Orr points out, "[a] kind of self-censorship" usually exists for some time after a war is over. But he also notes that "in the case of the Ulster Division, the period of inhibition, before a proper confrontation with the realities of the Great War, seems to have been an

⁷³ As conscription was not introduced in Ireland, many of the replacements in the Ulster Division for the casualties of the Somme came from elsewhere in the UK, and the division lost to a large extent its Ulster Protestant character.

⁷⁴ *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* 63.

⁷⁵ When the calendar was altered in the 18th century, the date changed from 1st to 12th July.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Orr, *The Road to the Somme* 218.

especially long one, reflecting...the reluctance of some Ulster people to confront with honesty their own place in history and, in particular, to question the true nature of their link with Britain.”⁷⁷ The Somme symbolises, for loyalists, the Union sealed with blood:⁷⁸ the “old covenanting spirit, the old sense of the alliance of ‘Bible and Sword’” was, for Falls, “reborn” in the men of the Ulster Division.⁷⁹ David Miller explains that Ulster’s relationship with England has always been seen by Ulster in terms of a contractual bond: the Bill of Rights in 1688 “is understood as a once-for-all transaction - a contract undertaken with King William”, hence the times when Ulster resisted the British parliament were times when that contract was perceived as broken or undermined by England.⁸⁰ Ulster Protestantism’s commitment to the Great War was, therefore, based on the premise that to give to England meant also to receive. Philip Orr quotes a popular poem of the period which expresses this sentiment:

The sword half drawn on her own behalf
In Ulster’s Red Right Hand
Will leap from the scabbard and flash like fire
For the common Motherland.

And wherever the fight is hottest,
And the sorest task is set,
ULSTER WILL STRIKE FOR ENGLAND-
AND ENGLAND WILL NOT FORGET.⁸¹

Loyalty, although it proclaims itself as unconditional, an essential Ulster Protestant quality, is in fact something which is given under certain conditions.⁸² Unionist

⁷⁷ *The Road to the Somme* 227.

⁷⁸ Michael McDonagh noted in 1917 that “[b]y an astounding transformation of events”, the Ulster Division “were to bleed and give their lives for all they revere and cherish, not in Ulster but on the hills and in the woods of Picardy”. *The Irish on the Somme* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917) 27. “The Battle for which the UVF so long and so diligently prepared was not denied them”, A.T.Q. Stewart writes. In other words, 1 July 1916 was, for the Ulster Division, a battle in defence of the Union, even though it “is known to history as the Battle of the Somme”. *The Ulster Crisis* (London: Faber, 1967) 237. The link between 1912 and 1916 is now so well-established, it no longer requires explication: Gordon Lucy’s *The Ulster Covenant: A Pictorial History of the 1912 Home Rule Crisis* (The Ulster Society: New Ulster Publications Ltd., 1989) carries a photograph of Carson signing the Covenant on the front cover, and, without comment, a painting of the charge of the 36th Division on 1 July on the inside cover: one is seen as a consequence and vindication of the other.

⁷⁹ *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* 16.

⁸⁰ David Miller, *Queen’s Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 62-64.

⁸¹ *The Road to the Somme* 54.

interpretation of events in the Great War followed that pattern in that emphasis was placed on the fact that Ulster fulfilled its part of the contract. The "betrayal" of Ulster in 1916 thus came in two ways: first, the Ulster Division was, it seems, wantonly sacrificed on the banks of the Somme, and second, despite that sacrifice, the British government began negotiations with Irish republicans following the Easter Rising. (Yeats seems to have been the only person in Ireland at this time even to hint that England was capable of keeping faith with anybody.) Ulster Unionism was, in a way, in a catch-22 position after the Somme: it could not rebel, or do much more than shout betrayal at the government when it was with the other hand pointing to Easter 1916 as proof of Ulster's loyalty and nationalist Ireland's traitorous perfidy. The Somme was caught in the middle of this confusion: it was projected as success in the loyalist myths of history, but it was also futile sacrifice because it did not yield the anticipated reward from England.

In this sense, some of the ways in which the Rising can be explained also apply to the Ulster Division on the Somme. But the Rising has been amenable to imaginative expression in a way the Somme has not. The Battle of the Somme was not pre-determined myth, it was history transformed retrospectively into events understood only in mythic terms. In a peculiar way, therefore, the absence of a literature about the Great War in Ulster is the most accurate measure of history available: there does not appear to have been at the time any frame of reference in which both the Somme and Ulster Unionism could be treated imaginatively in a way which would enable them both to receive their due. In the Battle of the Somme, reality was very different from the imagined event. In the Easter Rising, reality was transformed into the imagined event, which, because imagination prefigured action, then dictated the nature of reality. Perhaps history is never so amenable to the workings of the imagination as before it

⁸² Edward Carson defined it in terms of essentialism in his maiden speech to the House of Lords in 1921: "Loyalty is a strange thing. It is something which you cannot get by merely sitting round a table and trying to find a formula for an Oath of Allegiance which means nothing. It is something born and bred in you...I know that it is something born in you, inherited in you, and that is the safety of the State." As a result, there is some irony in the fact that he also warned "do not try us too high". *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.3, 362.

actually happens, even if any amount of revision can be attempted afterwards. The Somme, therefore, was beyond literal or imaginative control: if it had been incorporated into literature with any fidelity to the original experience, it would potentially lose whatever value it might have had politically in Ulster, and if fidelity to the experience were abandoned, literature would dwindle to mere Unionist propaganda. (From this point of view, it is not so much that Ulster's Great War soldiers have been forgotten; rather they have suffered from an overdose of ceremonial remembrance.)

Ulster loyalism is not, as has been pointed out, a tradition generally associated with imagination and poetry.⁸³ Miller suggests that the "honest Ulsterman" motif emerged in 1885 partly because honesty was the virtue associated with the keeping of bargains. The Irish nationalist hero's "prime virtue" on the other hand, is "his willingness to die for his country".⁸⁴ It is these "honest Ulsterman" qualities which were praised during the war, and which did not allow for the imaginatively powerful image of the sacrificial victim that permeates much Easter Rising literature. Edward Carson defined the true quality of the Ulsterman in terms of manly inflexibility: "[I]f I know anything about Ulster I know this, that men like you, who have once made up your minds, will never be diverted from what you believe to be the right course until you have successfully reached the goal for which you set out."⁸⁵ The poetry that appeared in Ulster newspapers following the Somme tried to pull together the ideals of Protestantism and the virtues of sacrifice. But the qualified success of the Ulster Division's exploits did not lend themselves to imaginative expression with the same ease as Easter 1916's "failure". Most of the popular poetry in Ulster avoided the reality of death, and if it followed the nationalist tradition of citing one's dead in order to validate one's political claims, it did so not with the rhetoric of martyrdom, but with a consciously optimistic, sometimes insensitive and generally triumphant note:

⁸³ See Joe McMinn, "Language, Literature and Cultural Identity," *Styles of Belonging: the Cultural Identities of Ulster*, ed. Jean Lundy and Aodán Mac Póilín (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1992) 48.

⁸⁴ *Queen's Rebels* 116.

⁸⁵ Sir Edward Carson speaking to men of the Antrim Regiment of the Ulster Volunteers, quoted in the *Belfast Newsletter* 2 Oct. 1914: 7.

"Dead," do you call these heroes?
 Dead? who have given birth
 To all that makes life living -
 To all that is of worth;
 No, never, never write it -
 This "death" is Freedom's girth!

This wounding is for homeland -
 For Britain's winsome weal -
 Through all the years advancing,
 A theme for song, a peal
 That swings in jubilation -
 How Ulster met the steel!⁸⁶

The Somme was military success that turned to failure; the Rising worked the other way around. But the irony is that the reversal of events - the gradual success of Easter 1916 and the erosion of Ulster Protestant illusions regarding the Somme - did not bring about a corresponding reversal of the apparently inspirational or uninspirational nature of the subject matter. The question hovering behind both events is that of how far violence can be validated: in other words are there forms which are "right" (the Rising) and forms which are "wrong" (the Great War, the Irish Civil War). In a way the question is ludicrous, but it is true that certain forms of bloodshed in Ireland have attained, through the idea of sacrifice for a good cause, a tragic status in the imagination, and others have not. Since the same event is open to different interpretations in this way - the Great War in England has a tragic status and imaginative impact it has never attained in Ireland - the tragic quality of any response to history must be informed by the socio-political reality of the time. Thus, violence in Ulster loyalism is perceived as legitimate on contractual and rational terms, and in Irish nationalism on sacrificial and irrational terms, (terms which deny that it has to be "legitimate" at all). So the method of reading Irish history that leaves the republican in 1916 with everything to gain, if it is applied to the Somme, leaves the Ulster Protestant with everything to lose.⁸⁷ In addition, Ulster

⁸⁶ William J. Gallagher, "The Red Hand of Ulster: Somme - July 1st, 1916," *Belfast Evening Telegraph* 12 July 1916: 2.

⁸⁷ It is difficult, therefore, to understand Kiberd's assertion that "[f]rom this distance, the myths surrounding 1916 and the Somme seem almost identical". Both, he claims, perpetuate the myth of a "lost generation": "In Ireland it was soon put about that the most creative and promising intellects had been lost in the Rising"; this being, he suggests, "the Irish version of the English tale of a lost generation". *Inventing Ireland* 247. The comparison eliminates the Ulster experience from the

Protestantism inevitably avoids the rhetoric associated with Irish Republicanism. But the rhetoric which characterised, and still characterises Ulster Protestantism was not adequate in the war and immediate post-war years to the task of presenting the Great War experience in terms other than those which were restrictive and, ultimately, damaging. The Somme in loyalist history might be the culmination of a process of self-defence that stretches back through history to the Battle of the Boyne, but the fundamental problem with the Somme is its innate irrationality as an event. As McIlwaine puts it in *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, "The whole of Ulster will be lost. We're not making a sacrifice...you've seen this war. We are the sacrifice."⁸⁸ The sheer scale and stupidity of the battle make it lie uneasily in the Ulster Protestant mythology designed to accommodate it. That unease is an indictment not only of the Great War, but also of an inadequate rhetoric and mythology which cannot tolerate what it cannot control.

IV.

The Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising functioned, in their different ways, as part of the origin myths of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State respectively. They became events which were held to encapsulate the inherent qualities of the true Ulster Protestant (proud, reticent, unimaginative) or true Irish Catholic (spiritual, voluble, imaginative), oppositional stereotypes used and abused on both sides. But they have this in common: they simplify interpretations of history, and in doing so leave completely out of the equation those Irish soldiers who fought in the Great War and yet were committed to an independent Ireland, those, in other words, whose actions cannot easily be explained in one or other version of events. One reason for the past neglect of Ireland's Great War literature (by combatants), which, though not extensive, does exist, is perhaps that most of its writers fall into this category: they speak from and for a

equation, ignoring the fact that the Ulster myths surrounding the Somme are the ones which have reverberated in Irish history, and in the processes of "inventing Ireland", and is, therefore, specious.

⁸⁸ Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (London: Faber, 1986) 51. McIlwaine quotes here Kipling's "Ulster 1912".

history repressed both north and south of the border. "The origin of states", said Marx, "gets lost in a myth in which one may believe but one may not discuss"; to do so, in Ireland, is to uncover an infinitely more varied experience of, and response to, the Great War than has generally been acknowledged. (Terence Brown's exploration of Irish culture in the Great War simultaneously recognises and breaks this prohibition in its title: "Who Dares to Speak?".⁸⁹) In recent years, interest in the Irish experience of the Great War has been reawakened, in part through the pioneering work of Philip Orr, Terence Denman, Keith Jeffery, Thomas Dooley and others.⁹⁰ If historians earlier in the century neglected or over-simplified the Great War, that process has undergone a dramatic reversal in the last ten years.⁹¹

One effect of this reversal has been the growing interest in, and search for, Ireland's Great War literature. The first studies of Irish culture and the Great War have

⁸⁹ Terence Brown, "Who Dares to Speak?: Ireland and the Great War," *English Studies in Transition*, ed. Robert Clark and Piero Boitani (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁹⁰ Philip Orr's *The Road to the Somme*, which appeared in 1987, was in many ways groundbreaking. In contrast to previous histories of the Ulster Division, it told the story through the individual's experience, and in doing so shifted understanding of the war away from politically determined perceptions. Terence Denman's *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: the 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War 1914-1918* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992) rescued the predominantly Catholic, nationalist volunteers in the Great War from the obscurity into which they had fallen, and thereby redressed some of the cultural amnesia on the subject. Other significant contributions to the field include: Thomas P Dooley, *Irishmen or English Soldiers? The Times and World of a Southern Catholic Irish Man (1876-1916) Enlisting in the British Army During the First World War* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995); David Fitzpatrick, ed. *Ireland and the First World War* (Dublin: Trinity History Workshop, 1986); Myles Dungan, *Irish Voices from the Great War* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995); Myles Dungan, *They Shall Grow Not Old: Irish Soldiers and the Great War* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997); Richard Doherty, *The Sons of Ulster: Ulstermen at War from the Somme to Korea* (Belfast: Appletree, 1992), based on a series of radio interviews with war veterans; Keith Jeffery, "The Great War in Modern Irish Memory," *Men, Women and War* ed. T.G.Fraser and Keith Jeffery (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993); Thomas Dooley, "Southern Ireland, Historians and the First World War," *Irish Studies Review* 4 (Autumn 1993): 5-9; Timothy Bowman, "The Irish at the Somme," *History Ireland* 4.4 (Winter 1996): 48-52; David Officer, "Representing War: The Somme Heritage Centre," *History Ireland* 3.1 (Spring 1995): 38-42; Philip Orr, "The Somme Legacy," *Linen Hall Review* 4.4 (Winter 1987): 5-7. In 1996, *Causeway* 3.2 (Summer 1996): 14-28, contained several articles, by Orr and others, considering "The Legacy of 1916", both in terms of the Easter Rising and the Somme. Jane Leonard's work on First World War Remembrance in Ireland has exploded many of the myths surrounding the war - see Chapter 5 below - as has Gillian McIntosh's research into Unionist interpretations of history in the twentieth century.

⁹¹ It is also appropriate that the historical revisionism of the last ten to fifteen years in relation to the domestic politics of this period - notably Bew's work on Redmondism - coincides with, perhaps has helped to inspire, the resurgence of interest in Ireland's role in the Great War.

brooded on both the absence and the neglect of Ireland's response to the war.⁹² The First World War "revival" in England predates the Irish one by over thirty years. Interest was reawakened in the 1960s partly by A.J.P Taylor's accessible *The First World War: An Illustrated History* in 1966, also by the appearance of studies of Great War poetry - Bergonzi's 1965 *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, John H. Johnstone's 1964 *English Poetry of the First World War*. These consolidated the idea that Great War poetry was, largely, poetry by combatants: Brian Gardner's 1964 anthology, *Up the Line to Death*, implicitly endorsed that view. The book was designed to counterbalance previous (now little-known) war anthologies which had not devoted a great deal of space to soldier poets, and to thereby rescue some of those soldier poets from obscurity. The success of the endeavour may be measured by the fact that the anthology's original purpose exists now itself in the realm of obscurity. "War poetry" has come to mean, specifically, the "trench lyric" in popular perception, to the extent that it has recently become necessary to challenge the conjunction.⁹³ War memoirs - including those by Sassoon, Blunden, Brittain, Campion Vaughan - have been reprinted as a consequence of the revival in interest. Anthologising Great War poetry is still a thriving industry, more so than in relation to any other single event in English history.

In contrast to the over-anthologised English canon of Great War poetry, Ireland's Great War literature, if this is defined as work by those who participated in the war, is a diffuse set of writings. The origins of some works of art in the Great War have, as Jeffery notes, been forgotten;⁹⁴ Terence Brown, on the other hand, suggests that "the silence of the country's writers speaks volumes", that it was "as if the Irish had agreed

⁹² These include Keith Jeffery, "Irish Culture and the Great War," *Bullán* 1.2 (Autumn 1994); Terence Brown, "Who Dares to Speak?: Ireland and the Great War," *English Studies in Transition*; Edna Longley, "The Rising, the Somme and Irish Memory," *The Living Stream*; Tjebbe Westendorp, "The Great War in Irish Memory: The Case of Poetry," *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama*, ed. Geert Lernout (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991); Keith Jeffery, "Irish Prose Writers of the First World War," *Modern Irish Writers and the Wars*; Keith Jeffery, "The Great War in Modern Irish Memory," *Men, Women and War*.

⁹³ James Scott Campbell discusses this development. *Other Wars: Ethics and Violence in Twentieth Century British and Irish War Poetry*, diss., U. of Notre Dame, 1996, 53-56.

⁹⁴ "Irish Culture and the Great War" 87-88.

collectively, if for widely differing reasons, to dismiss from consciousness their own involvement in the greatest cataclysm ever to have befallen European civilization". He finds it "extraordinary that there are no Irish war poets (if we except Francis Ledwidge...)"⁹⁵ Both points are valid (although Brown's last claim is rather exaggerated). Ledwidge, perhaps because of the absence of any other context in which to read him, is probably the only Irish writer whose work is considered primarily in relation to the Great War, however little he engaged with it. On the whole, the reputations of Ireland's "soldier-poets" are established in other areas. Tom Kettle is viewed primarily as essayist and politician; C.S.Lewis as an English academic and religious writer;⁹⁶ Monk Gibbon is a minor figure in the Irish canon in spite of, not because of, his war experience;⁹⁷ Thomas MacGreevy fits into the 1930s Modernist tradition; Patrick MacGill is "The Navvy Poet", not the war poet (the popularity of his war memoirs, notably amongst soldiers, during the war itself is now sometimes forgotten); Harry Midgely earns a place in history in his role as Labour politician not Ulster Division soldier-poet. As will be seen, notably in the case of W.B.Yeats, the principle also extends to those non-combatants writing in Ireland during the war.⁹⁸

The search for Ireland's war literature has begun to lead, in some cases, to a reconsideration of the Great War as a productive context in which to read work by those who served in the army. Poems by Kettle and Ledwidge were included in Anne

⁹⁵ "Who Dares to Speak? Ireland and the Great War" 229-30.

⁹⁶ Lewis's spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* 1955 (London: Fount, 1977), only includes such of his war experience as he considers necessary to illuminate his spiritual development, partly on the grounds that, he writes, "[t]he war itself has been so often described by those who saw more of it than I...". 157. His first volume of poems, *Spirits in Bondage*, consisting mainly of poems about the War, and contrasting the war with his experience of Ireland, was first published in 1919, and had, until recently, been out of print for 75 years. It was reprinted in *Poems* (London: Fount, 1994), but the reprinting has not redressed the total neglect of these poems, none of which has been anthologised in connection with the Great War. Partly this may be because his subsequent poems have a religious rather than literary interest: the first collection sits uncomfortably in some ways with his later poetry.

⁹⁷ An interview with Monk Gibbon in 1987 makes no mention either of *Inglorious Soldier* or of his experience of the Great War. "Q & A with Monk Gibbon," interview by Geoffrey Inverarity, *Irish Literary Supplement* 6.2 (Fall 1987): 29-30. It is difficult to imagine that this would not be the main point of interest - at least for the interviewer - in relation to an English writer who was also a veteran and memoirist of that war.

⁹⁸ Very little mention, for example, is made of the fact that Katherine Tynan, with two sons serving on the Western Front, wrote several (patriotic) poems about the Great War.

Powell's *A Deep Cry*, along with introductory biographical essays.⁹⁹ The publication of Ledwidge's *Selected Poems*, with the Heaney seal of approval in the form of an introduction and postscript, has raised his profile in Ireland, and also that of the work of his biographer, Alice Curtayne. Susan Schriebman, in her recent edition of Thomas MacGreevy's *Collected Poems*, prioritises MacGreevy's war experiences (unlike the earlier Redshaw edition introduced by Samuel Beckett¹⁰⁰) suggesting that his poetry "stands as a testament" to "two events which were to change the course of his life: the Great War and the Irish Civil War", and, in the annotations, illuminates the texts with this principle in mind.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, to attribute too much importance to these writers, as poets at any rate, by virtue of their combatant status, may be to offer a slightly misleading, or at least a very limited picture. As Keith Jeffery notes, "[t]he Irish cultural response to the Great War has not by any means been confined to the wartime period or the years immediately following. Indeed, over the years there has been a simmering of interest on the part of Irish writers with the First World War."¹⁰² George Orwell's view of the Great War, that it "was only a heightened moment in an almost continuous crisis",¹⁰³ reverberates in Irish history possibly to a greater degree than in England. Francis Ledwidge predicted, wrongly, that Yeats would be remembered primarily for his early poems.¹⁰⁴ Despite his own involvement in it, he did not attribute to the Great War the potential to bring about radical cultural change that became its hallmark in England. Nor, in one sense, would such a view be entirely accurate, since 1916, as Yeats recognised, sowed the seeds of an Anglo-Irish and a Civil War which caused bitterness and disillusionment in Ireland, as the latter half of the Great War caused those feelings in England. The Great War in Ireland cannot be separated in

⁹⁹ *A Deep Cry* (Aberporth: Palladour Books, 1993) 130-39, 280- 89.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas MacGreevy, *Collected Poems*, ed. Thomas Dillon Redshaw (Dublin: New Writers' Press, 1971)

¹⁰¹ Susan Schriebman, ed., *Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreevy: An Annotated Edition* (Dublin: Anna Livia Press, 1991) xix.

¹⁰² "Irish Culture and the Great War" 93.

¹⁰³ George Orwell, "Inside the Whale," *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol.1 (London: Penguin, 1970) 575.

¹⁰⁴ "I don't think [Yeats] has ever quite reached the hearts of the people", Ledwidge wrote, "and if any of his works live it will be the early poems on Maeve and Cuchullain". Quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet* 181.

memory from the violence that preceded and followed it, or from the sense, which in some ways has persisted through the century, of what Gellner calls “the condition of pervasive, latent war”.¹⁰⁵ Hugh Middleton argues that:

Even without active war-fighting, the presence of an armed force...uniforms, flags and other symbols, and an administrative and managerial structure that encourages the style of leadership most likely to succeed under conditions of intense intergroup conflict, all serve as a continuing reminder of the potential threat from outside, and function, therefore, as important psychological bastions of internal cohesion.¹⁰⁶

Both Paul Fussell and Jon Silkin quote, in their closing chapters, Francis Hope’s judgement that “[i]n a not altogether rhetorical sense, all poetry written since 1918 is war poetry”.¹⁰⁷ “[W]ar”, Orwell argued, “is only ‘peace intensified’”.¹⁰⁸ The comment is in some ways peculiarly pertinent to the Irish experience of the Great War: it partially explains the absence of a cohesive, prominent response to the European conflict in Ireland between 1914-18; it simultaneously accounts for the fact that war pervades and informs much of Ireland’s twentieth-century literature, a literature that responds to (and reacts against) the reductive histories of internal “intergroup conflict” consolidated in the First World War.

¹⁰⁵ Ernest Gellner, “An Anthropological View of War and Violence,” *The Institution of War*, ed. Robert A. Hinde (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992) 78.

¹⁰⁶ “Some Psychological Bases of the Institution of War,” *The Institution of War* 42.

¹⁰⁷ Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: the Poetry of the Great War*, 1972 (London: Ark, 1987) 347-8; Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 325. Fussell quotes the comment with more approval than Silkin, who reads in it an attempt to sideline the achievement of the soldier poets themselves.

¹⁰⁸ “Inside the Whale” 576.

Chapter 2



W.B. Yeats: Creation from Conflict

“...he seemed too odd a fish to adorn
A twentieth-century war.”

-Louis MacNeice¹

I.

Terence Brown, in “Who Dares to Speak? Ireland and the Great War”, suggests that the “suppression and eventual publication” of Yeats’s poem “Reprisals”, “exemplifies in miniature the larger suppressions and resurfacings in Irish consciousness of the profound effects upon Irish life of the Great War itself”.² Like O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie*, it indicates that there is “a problem as to how the experience of the Great War should be addressed by an Irish artist”.³ For Yeats, as an example either to his contemporaries or to later poets, the problem is certainly peculiar in a way it is not for poets in England and America by virtue of his nationality, his consistent Irish nationalism and, inextricably entwined with this, his aesthetic. As a result, he is sometimes accused of a kind of Joycean *non serviam* in relation to the Great War: as Arthur Lane puts it, he issues a “professional-poet disclaimer of responsibility”,⁴ and Stallworthy describes him as “undistracted by compassion, unmoved by the prospect of suffering” in relation to the violence and bloodshed of Europe.⁵ Equally, he may be seen as in some way anachronistic in terms of the modernism in English writing which the war, in part, brought about. From such a point of view, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is

¹ “Autumn Sequel: Canto IV” *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1966) 347

² Terence Brown, “Who Dares to Speak? Ireland and the Great War,” *English Studies in Transition* ed. Robert Clark and Piero Boitani (London: Routledge, 1993) 227

³ *Ibid.* 229.

⁴ Arthur E. Lane, *An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1972) 51.

⁵ Jon Stallworthy, “W.B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen,” *Critical Quarterly* 11.3 (Autumn 1969): 214. Stallworthy makes these comments in relation to “The Second Coming”, written three months after Owen was killed.

representative of the post-war shift in consciousness, and Yeats leads himself up a blind alley that is indicative of a "refus[al] to come to terms with the real shaping vitality of Ireland where he sees it exists",⁶ and which results in "incoherence and...an almost wilful mysticism".⁷ T.R. Henn expounds a view which has now become something of a commonplace: that the Easter Rising and the Civil War were the crucial events in the formation of Yeats's aesthetic, and that "the larger war in Europe had passed him by".⁸

Such views are encouraged by some of Yeats's own comments, notably his claim during the War that "I shall keep the neighbourhood of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, hoping to catch their comfortable snores till bloody frivolity is over".⁹ But Yeats is not always the best guide, and some of his statements about the Great War are deliberately evasive and contentious. None of the judgements above adequately explains the complexity or the scale of Yeats's response to the Great War, or the degree to which he has comprehended the innate difficulties of imaginative treatment of war, more specifically, the Great War, and, in his own terms, surmounted them. The way in which Yeats negotiates with the Great War provides a context for and a contrast to his approach to the Rising and the Civil War: the responses to all three events in his poetry may be seen as inextricably linked. The complexity and often the elusiveness characterising his treatment of the Great War indicates not that it "passed him by", but that the war's place in Irish memory is considerably more ambiguous than various critics have allowed for or recognised when passing judgement on Yeats. Lane appears to imply that Yeats fudges the issue, that he is in some way guilty for not facing the subject matter of the war with the sense of moral urgency that characterised Owen's or Sassoon's poetry: the only "adequate response" here is, unquestionably, the English soldier-poet response. Stallworthy, too, implies that the Owenesque protest-elegy is the proper way to indicate strength of feeling: yet the intensity of "The Second Coming", a

⁶ Thomas Kinsella and W.B. Yeats, *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson: Tradition and the Irish Writer* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970) 62.

⁷ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber, 1985) 49.

⁸ T.R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower* 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1965) 20.

⁹ "To Henry James," 20 Aug. [1915], *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 600.

poem inspired by events in Europe in the war years, hardly shows a Yeats “unmoved” and “undistracted”, and its apocalyptic sensibility is one which also resonates on the Western Front. In effect, expectations of Yeats in relation to the Great War, and to the poetry written during the war, are sometimes Anglocentric and inappropriate.¹⁰ It is worth, therefore, considering Yeats’s view of English and Irish involvement in the Great War in the context of Anglo-Irish relations as well as European history.

Yeats perceived the struggle between Ireland and England as a struggle between a spiritual nation on the one hand, and a materialist, capitalist society with a tendency to admire what Yeats hated above all - “the literature of the point of view”¹¹ - on the other. Imperialism was the worst manifestation of such a society, and when the Great War began, as Elizabeth Cullingford explains, “[t]he protector of ‘little Belgium’ was oppressor of little Ireland, and Home Rule still hung in the balance”.¹² The patriotism prevalent in some English writing at the outbreak of (and during) the war, is the patriotism Yeats despises since it accepted unquestioningly the concept of Empire and incorporated that concept into the role of the Englishman. At the time of the Boer War, Yeats differentiates between “patriotism of the fine sort - patriotism that lays burdens upon a man” and the “patriotism that takes burdens off”, and complains that the British Press in particular seemed only to understand “the sort that makes a man say ‘I need not trouble to get wisdom for I am English, & my vices have made me great’”.¹³ The idealism that sent men to the recruiting offices in 1914, the faith in England and English virtues, would hardly find sympathy with any Irishman who remained a victim of that kind of imperialist attitude: one critic said of Yeats in 1914 that “he is...so Irish that it

¹⁰ The problem of anthologising Yeats’s work in connection with the Great War indicates the dominance of certain expectations about the style, tone and content of a Great War poem: for the most part, only “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” is included in First World War anthologies, but it has also proved difficult to contextualise the poem. I.M. Parsons places it with a selection of 1914-15 poems in the “Visions of Glory” section (which is then countered by “The Bitter Truth”) even though it was not written until 1918. See *Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War*, ed. I.M. Parsons (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965) 47.

¹¹ *Essays and Introductions* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1961) 511. Hereafter abbreviated in the notes to this chapter as *E & I*.

¹² Elizabeth Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1981) 87.

¹³ “To Henry Newbolt,” c.25 Apr. 1901, vol. 3 *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats 1901-1904*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 63.

requires an Englishman to criticise him”;¹⁴ similarly, in a rather bizarre poem, Sinn Fein came under fire for its refusal to fight for English justice and mercy (“Let others rise when Pity cries; / We rise but for ourselves alone”¹⁵). At no time does Yeats advocate a pro-German stance - “I have friends fighting in Flanders....How can I help but feeling [sic] as they feel and desiring a German defeat”¹⁶ - but he does not suggest at any point that it is Ireland’s moral duty to assist England in securing that defeat. J.B. Priestley describes the outbreak of war in 1914 as “a challenge that was almost like a conscription of the spirit”.¹⁷ For Yeats, that spiritual challenge is located elsewhere, in the attempt to restore to literature and society “the ancient religion of the world”¹⁸ and prevent “the enemy”, at this stage England/the middle classes, rooting up “our rose garden and plant[ing] a cabbage garden instead”.¹⁹ “Contemporary English literature”, Yeats writes, “takes delight in praising England and her Empire, the master-work and dream of the middle class”.²⁰ His own spiritual challenge is thus, almost as if by default, fundamentally nationalistic, antagonistic both to the fruits and demands of Imperialism.

In this context, the Great War has to be seen as the inevitable result of a system and culture from which he consistently tried to protect the Irish people because it was, from the outset, a middle-class war. Eksteins describes it as:

the first middle class war in history. If previous wars were wars of dynasticism, of feudal and aristocratic interests, of princely rivalries, then the First World War was the first great war of the bourgeoisie. It is therefore hardly surprising that the values of this middle class should have become the dominant values of the war, determining not only the behavior of individual soldiers but the whole organization and even strategy and tactics of the war.²¹

¹⁴ Eric Chilman, “W.B. Yeats,” *The Poetry Review* (Jan-June 1914): 70.

¹⁵ Isobel Marchbank, “Sinn Fein,” *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence*, ed. Martin Stephen (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 268.

¹⁶ Quoted in Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 87.

¹⁷ Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight* (London: Constable, 1965) 32.

¹⁸ *E & I* 176.

¹⁹ *E & I* 174.

²⁰ “The Literary Movement in Ireland,” *Ideals in Ireland*, ed. Lady Gregory, 1901 (New York: Lemma, 1973) 90.

²¹ *Rites of Spring* 1989 (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1990) 177.

That it is a middle-class war is, for Yeats, both its failing and, paradoxically, its advantage, since this is the very quality which enables him to simultaneously dissociate the war from an ideal Ireland, and utilise it as a form of opposition to the values he propounds. The way in which he does so is unique, possibly even arbitrary, but perhaps no more so than that of any other writer: as Eksteins points out, the “‘real war’ had ceased to exist in 1918. Thereafter it was swallowed by imagination in the guise of memory.”²²

Yeats sets up an opposition between two different ways - English and Irish - of responding to the subject of the Great War, an opposition which in its essentials is not new in his thinking, but one whose terms are reinforced by the events of 1914-18. Brooding on the ways in which the Great War can be incorporated into literature, he writes that:

English critics feel differently. To them a theme that ‘bulks largely in the news’ gives dignity to human nature, even raises it to international importance. We on the other hand are certain that nothing can give dignity to human nature but the character and energy of its expression.²³

As far as the issue of war in general is concerned, Yeats appears to be, initially, both confusing and confused, veering from sympathy with the bloodthirsty policy of Mitchell - “‘Send war in our time, O Lord!’”²⁴ - to the more ambiguously dismissive attitude characteristic of his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*: “If war is necessary...it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever.”²⁵ The confusion, or the distance between his views, comes at the point when the poet’s ideas and his context overlap in a way which could potentially put poetry at risk, could hinder the “character and energy of its expression”. The different attitudes to war are, in fact, less different attitudes than they are expressions of fundamentally different conceptions

²² *Rites of Spring* 297.

²³ W.B. Yeats, quoted in Joseph Hone, *W.B. Yeats 1865-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1942) 389.

²⁴ “Under Ben Bulbin,” *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950) 398. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Yeats’s poetry are taken from this edition. Subsequent references in this chapter to page numbers for quotations from this edition are given in parentheses in the body of the text.

²⁵ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) xxxv.

of “war”: the Mitchell invocation is a plea for dignity and energy; the dismissiveness a rejection of a “theme that ‘bulks largely in the news’”.

Yeats is clear on what he sees as the results of conflict:

I think that all noble things are the result of warfare; great nations and classes, of warfare in the visible world, great poetry and philosophy, of invisible warfare, the division of a mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself.²⁶

He is also, at this stage, less clear, or at least less explicit, on how modern warfare can be accommodated in this theory. “[G]reat...classes” suggests the aristocratic, chivalrous warfare of a bygone age which bears no resemblance to the carnage of the Western Front. The problem peculiar to the Great War is that not only is its conduct ignoble, but it does not result, or does not appear to result in any “noble things”: for some it became, in retrospect, “absurd...because of the failure of the postwar experience to justify the war”.²⁷ As Edmund Blunden put it, “[n]either race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won, and would go on winning.”²⁸ To create “great poetry” demands the ability to deal with the difficulty that faced Owen and others during the war itself, that the subject matter of the poetry is also the enemy of the poetry. Thus, Yeats’s warfare in the invisible world becomes problematical when it has to internalise a warfare in the visible world which consists of a mechanised slaughter incompatible with the internal conflict in a way the concept of battle pre-1914 would not have been.

The negation by the Great War of heroic ideals is now itself almost legendary. The myth of 1914, with its cloudless sky and idealism - “Never such innocence again”²⁹ - gives way to what Louis Mairé describes as “the spectacle of a civilization turning against itself to destroy itself” in the face of which “reason”, or the social and cultural myths underwriting pre-war experience, “cannot cope”.³⁰ Bergonzi suggests that in

²⁶ *E & I* 321.

²⁷ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* 297.

²⁸ Quoted in *The Bloody Game: An Anthology of Modern War*, ed. Paul Fussell (London: Scribners, 1991) 34.

²⁹ Philip Larkin, “MCMXIV,” *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and the Marvell Press, 1990) 128.

³⁰ Quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* 215-16.

Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*, Hotspur "exemplifies the moral virtues of heroism" but Falstaff "evacuates the word 'honour' of all the densities of meaning that it held for Hotspur", and that "one or other of these attitudes...will certainly be present when war is talked about."³¹ Characteristic of those who fought in the Great War is the fact that "the Hotspurian mode in time gave place to the Falstaffian".³² The change, broadly speaking, is from the sentiment of Brooke's "The Dead (III)":

Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.³³

to that of Owen's "old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori".³⁴ Even the war's own title of "Great" has a suitably anachronistic ring to it, which perhaps accounted for an increasing desire to change it in a new age of "realism". Yeats suggests that until the war, poets "wrote as men had always written", but that:

established things were shaken by the Great War. All civilised men had believed in progress, in a warless future, in always-increasing wealth, but now influential young men began to wonder if anything could last or if anything were worth fighting for.³⁵

He recognises the loss of established tradition, but he also implies that such a loss can be dissociated from the Irish tradition since it was preoccupied with increasing wealth. "Irish poetry", he claims, "moves in a different direction and belongs to a different story".³⁶

In one sense, this may be true - Irish memory of the Great War is not the same as English memory - but in another sense the claim is still slightly disingenuous. Yeats was acutely aware of his role and stature within a European as well as an Irish context: he suggests that it is Celtic, or rather Irish myth which will create a spiritual basis for

³¹ *Heroes' Twilight* 11-12.

³² *Ibid.* 17.

³³ Rupert Brooke, *The Poetical Works*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber, 1970) 21.

³⁴ "Dulce Et Decorum Est," *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) 117.

³⁵ *E & I* 499.

³⁶ *E & I* 506. See also Ch. 4, 125-6 below.

acceptance into the highest standards of European literature, and that only in achieving international standards of excellence can a national literature have a profound effect on national politics.³⁷ But if the European tradition has been fragmented or changed as a result of the Great War, then by the criteria Yeats sets up for himself, he needs to reaffirm his own place within an Irish tradition and a broader European context. If “established things were shaken by the Great War”, this is ultimately as true for Ireland as it is for England: even if the war appears to be on the margins of Irish history, it is a catalyst for subsequent events - the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War, the Civil War - that, continuing as they do a line of violence originating in 1914, radically alter both Ireland and Yeats. The war, and the effects of the war, are not, therefore, issues that Yeats can really avoid, either in an Irish context, or with an eye, as always, on Europe. “Sinn Fein” as a kind of aesthetic ideal is as potentially detrimental to poetry as the opinionated, flag-waving “literature of the point of view”. To re-establish the spirituality of Ireland, and all “[b]eautiful lofty things” (348) without ignoring the crucial, psychic changes brought about by the First World War is, perhaps, a seemingly impossible agenda which accounts for some of Yeats’s misreadings and inconsistencies.

II.

In his reactions (often notorious) to other contemporary responses to the war, notably O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie* and Owen’s poetry, Yeats can be seen as testing the capabilities of his own aesthetic in relation to that subject matter, divining the possibilities for poetry in a process of elimination. His opinion of Wilfred Owen is the most extreme manifestation of his “distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war”.³⁸ Yeats writes that Owen “is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick....There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him.”³⁹ Bergonzi recognises that

³⁷ “[E]very new fountain of legends”, he writes, “is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world”, and “the Irish legends...have so much of a new beauty that they may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols” *E & I* 187. In *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), he suggests that rediscovery of those legends and arts might “deepen the political passion of the nation”, that “images, once created...might move of themselves” 194.

³⁸ *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* xxxiv.

³⁹ “To Dorothy Wellesley,” 21 Dec. [1936], *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, 874.

Yeats's assertions contain "a seed of truth", but also attributes the tone of the remarks in part to "senile rancour" and "jealousy", neither of which seems a convincing explanation.⁴⁰ Yeats's criticism of what Bergonzi describes as "sub-Keatsian poetic confectionery" is possibly justifiable. More revealing is his complaint against blood and dirt, which is simply another way of saying that Owen was "too near [his] subject matter to do...work of permanent importance".⁴¹ To be too near his subject matter does not mean, for Yeats, that Owen was necessarily disadvantaged by the actual experience of fighting in the war, but that Owen disadvantaged himself by deliberately narrowing his range in order to communicate his point of view. The soldier poets, he writes, "felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men"; he rejects those poems on the grounds that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry".⁴²

Stallworthy suggests that Owen's draft "Preface" would have seemed to Yeats "the most pernicious heresy":⁴³

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Heroes' Twilight* 125. It should be noted that Yeats's very famous letter about Owen was written in the midst of the furore about *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, and the note of impatience possibly has more to do with the critics' reaction to the anthology than with any particularly vindictive feeling towards Owen. It is also worth noting the extent to which Yeats appears to have been, initially, bewildered by that reaction. The bewilderment may serve to illustrate the different place the War holds in English and Irish cultural memories, exemplified by the privileged place combatant poetry holds in the former. Yeats writes: "When I excluded Wilfred Owen...I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution, and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum - however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same." "To Dorothy Wellesley," 21 Dec. [1936], *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 874.

⁴¹ *E & I* 500.

⁴² Introduction, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* xxxiv. Yeats is, presumably, referring here to Owen's famous letter, in which he wrote, "I came out in order to help these boys...by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can." "To Susan Owen," 4/5 Oct. 1918 *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: OUP, 1967) 580.

⁴³ "W.B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen" 214.

⁴⁴ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 192.

One way of reading Owen's preface is to assume that he views poetry as a product only of history, in that contemporary events dictate the poet's themes and role. Neither can the poet alter the course of history, or shape future consciousness. The "heresy" for Yeats, then, lies in Owen's readiness to make a moral and temporal choice at the expense of aesthetic freedom, to allow the war as subject-matter to take precedence over the luxury of imaginative autonomy.⁴⁵ Such a compromise is inconceivable in Yeats: "[t]o speak of one's emotions without fear or moral ambition, to come out from under the shadow of other men's minds, to forget their needs, to be utterly oneself" is, he claims, "all the Muses care for".⁴⁶ This betrayal of the imagination is also the fault for which he castigates Sean O'Casey and rejects *The Silver Tassie* (based on Owen's poem "The Disabled"). O'Casey's recognition that the Great War is a subject which needs to be addressed does not itself solve the problem of how to address the subject. Yeats wrote to O'Casey: "you are not interested in the great war; you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals, and so write out of your opinions" (a reference back to "literature of the point of view").⁴⁷ But in the same letter, Yeats goes on to outline what might be seen as an agenda for addressing the war in literature:

The mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background, and obtrudes itself upon the stage as so much dead wood that will not burn up with the dramatic fire. Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself...the whole history of the world

⁴⁵ His earlier differentiation between English and Irish audiences also resonates in his critique of Owen: his sense that the English rather than the Irish admire "passive suffering" in art predates the well-known Oxford Book introduction by more than 25 years, and the terms of the critique of Great War literature are already in place. In 1910 Yeats writes: "I liked *The Shadow of the Glen* better than *Riders to the Sea*, that seemed for all the nobility of its end, its mood of Greek tragedy, too passive in suffering...Synge answered: 'It is a curious thing that *Riders to the Sea* succeeds with an English but not with an Irish audience, and *The Shadow of the Glen*, which is not liked by an English audience, is always liked in Ireland...' *E & I* 336. He reiterates this view, and the English-Irish opposition embodied within it, in the polemical *On the Boiler*: "The English are an objective people; they have no longer a sense of tragedy in their theatre; pity, which is fed by observation instead of experience, has taken its place." *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962) 428. ("Objective", in the context of *A Vision*, means primary, reasonable and moral, as opposed to the subjective, which is emotional, aesthetic, antithetical.)

⁴⁶ *E & I* 339.

⁴⁷ Ironically, although the criticisms Yeats makes of Owen and O'Casey seem, in a way, contradictory - one fails to write successfully about the war because of his experience of it, the other fails because of his lack of experience - in both cases a failure in imaginative power is seen as the end result.

must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak.

Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions; while he is writing he has no business to know anything that is not a portion of that action.⁴⁸

Yeats is talking here about drama, but the standards apply also to poetry since poetry is, as he perceives it, inherently dramatic: the poet "is more type than man, more passion than type. He is Lear, Romeo, Oedipus, Tiresias; he has stepped out of a play."⁴⁹ To write about the war means, equally, to resist the war and all it represents by fighting and defeating the greatness of the war itself.

"On being asked for a War Poem" has often been quoted as if it is Yeats's manifesto for a correct, *non serviam* response to the war, especially as he claimed that "[i]t is the only thing I have written of the war or will write":⁵⁰

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night. (175)

The poem is, as Cullingford points out, disingenuous, since "setting the statesman right had always been, and would continue to be, one of Yeats's favourite pastimes in Ireland".⁵¹ He is, she argues, deliberately evading political alignment either with Pearse or with Redmond, and by doing so eliminates the possibility that his art could be perceived as journalistic or propagandist.⁵² The poem is also disingenuous because it implies that a level of experience exists to which poetry cannot provide an adequate response. But perhaps the final purpose of the poem is to express disapproval of a type-cast poetry. It is not the only thing he wrote of the war, but in changing the title of the poem, two years after its composition, from "A Reason for Keeping Silent" to "On being asked for a War Poem", and then in following that title with something that is so

⁴⁸ *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 741.

⁴⁹ *E & I* 509.

⁵⁰ *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 600.

⁵¹ *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 86.

⁵² *Ibid.*

obviously not a “war poem” in the sense in which the category is commonly understood, he dissociates himself from the popular perception of the “true” war poets, and frees himself from the expectations that perception generates.⁵³

“War poetry” may be a category both Yeats and Owen try to avoid. Owen changes his original definition of “true war poets” in his Preface to simply “true poets”. But when Owen writes that “English poetry is not yet fit to speak of [heroes]”, he implies that society is not yet fit to have such poems written about it; Yeats, on the other hand, will elevate the society, or the situation, to suit the art. “Easter 1916” is a classic example, as the Rising involves the people of whom he most disapproves. His description of the insurgents as “[c]oming...[f]rom counter or desk” (202) with which he opens the poem is an accurate social description of the lower middle class Catholics. But the question of whether the Rising elevates them above the ordinary is, in a way, irrelevant. What the Rising cannot do, the poet will do for it: the insurgents are, by virtue of having been written out in a verse, “changed utterly”. If Owen’s concern is to be truthful, to present events as they are, then Yeats’s is to transform events into what they should be - grist to his poetic mill.

Stallworthy refutes Yeats’s principal charge against Owen, that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry”, suggesting that the final lines of “Dulce et Decorum Est” indicate not passive suffering but “passionate indignation”:⁵⁴

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
...
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.⁵⁵

⁵³ Peter McDonald, in his 1996 British Academy Chatterton Lecture, “Yeats and Remorse”, noted that the various title changes of this poem, and the way in which it was recycled by Yeats for different literary enterprises, make it something of a poem for all seasons rather than a “Great War” poem.

⁵⁴ “W.B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen” 208.

⁵⁵ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 117.

But when one puts passive suffering in the context of Yeatsian tragedy (“the sense of comedy...is the social bond in times of peace as tragic feeling is in times of war”⁵⁶), then what should give “*Dulce et Decorum Est*” its tragic element, at least in so far as Yeats would define tragedy, is not the indignation of its conclusion but the “ecstasy of fumbling” at the approach of death, the half-terror, half-joy of a Dionysiac ritual which will carry the individual away from space and time, specific social and cultural milieu, to a sense of wholeness. Yeats writes that:

There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion.⁵⁷

Yeats’s rebels in “Easter 1916” have “resigned [their] part / In the casual comedy”, have inspired a “terrible beauty” (203); in Owen’s “*Dulce Et Decorum Est*”, the Yeatsian form of tragedy may be hinted at, but it is finally subverted: in the vision of “blood...gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer...” there is only the terror.

Apart from “On being asked for a War Poem”, Stallworthy claims that Yeats wrote two “war poems”: “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” and “Reprisals”. If they can be so described, then it is worth noting how oblique any reference to the Great War is. In “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”, only biographical detail about Robert Gregory known outside the boundaries of the poem locates that death in the First World War; similarly, in “Shepherd and Goatherd”, the man who “died in the great war beyond the sea” (160) could be almost any man (every man) in any age. Stallworthy does not identify “Shepherd and Goatherd” as a war poem, although it has no more or less claim to this title than “An Irish Airman”. The war does not impose itself on these two poems either with a greatness that thwarts the poet, or, as might be expected, as the most culturally significant war in Western Europe. Only in “Reprisals” can Yeats be tied

⁵⁶ *E & I* 259.

⁵⁷ *E & I* 322.

down to the Great War, and "Reprisals" did not find a place in his *Collected Poems*. Nevertheless, the war does have a role to play in "An Irish Airman", and, surprisingly, its role is an inspirational one. The poem reasserts the qualities that the war has apparently negated - heroism, the sense of tragedy, prophetic capabilities. If those qualities died a death on the Somme in 1916, to be replaced with irony, satire, farce, and the rise of the anti-hero, then Yeats is either anachronistic or one step ahead of the game, and has "remythologised" almost before the original myths have been subverted by history.

It would be unreasonable not to point out how far Yeats is assisted by the nature of Robert Gregory's involvement in the First World War. One of the most important characteristics of trench warfare was that individual skill, strength and purpose no longer guaranteed success. Since these are the qualities Yeats admires, to elegise a trench soldier would perhaps present enormous difficulties. Gregory is not Yeats's "solution" to the problem of the Great War, he is a cause of the problem because the individual death demanded an instant response where mass carnage did not. But because he served in the Royal Flying Corps, he can represent the survival of the heroic at a time when heroism was debased by mechanised slaughter. As Eksteins points out:

The air ace was the object of limitless envy among infantry, mired in mud and seeming helplessness. Soldiers looked up from their trenches and saw in the air a purity of combat that the ground war had lost. The "knights of the sky" were engaged in a conflict in which individual heroism still counted, romantic notions of honor, glory, heroism, and chivalry were still intact. In the air, war still had meaning. Flyers were the "aristocracy of war" - "the resurrection of our personality," as one writer put it.⁵⁸

In this way, the war can exist merely as a backdrop for heroic action, for the Irish airman's "lonely impulse of delight" (152).⁵⁹ Where the war retains the characteristics of glorious warfare, heroism can be celebrated; when it cannot receive Yeatsian approval, it becomes internalised and subsumed by an idiosyncratic vision of history.

⁵⁸ *Rites of Spring* 264-5.

⁵⁹ In another sense, of course, the poem has what might be described as futurist elements. It affirms a supposedly out-dated heroism and chivalry, but it also delights in the new technology that makes such heroism possible, and in doing so is unusual in Yeats's *oeuvre*. I am grateful to Eamonn Hughes for an illuminating discussion of this poem.

Yeats appropriates the Great War, traditionally seen in England as the breaking point with the past, and as disrupting a linear historical progression, into a cyclical narrative of history. In that sense, he is attuned to the different historical resonances of the war in an Irish context. *A Vision*, which I will return to later, is, in a way, Yeats's response to the problem of reconciling internal and external, or visible and invisible warfare. The book has its origins in the Great War years,⁶⁰ and is, Cullingford explains, "founded on, and inspired by, one fundamental antithesis: '*Primary* means democratic. *Antithetical* means aristocratic.'" "[E]very movement", Yeats thought, "prepares in the dark by its own increasing clarity and confidence its own executioner".⁶¹ Furthermore, "[t]he *primary* is that which serves, the *antithetical* is that which creates".⁶² It might even be possible to say, then, that the Great War and the Civil War, as the culmination of the trends of a primary age, will in fact bring about the antithetical qualities they appear to have destroyed. This is not far from Mairé's view, quoted above, of the Great War as "a civilization turning against itself to destroy itself", but it suggests that the spectacle is ultimately productive. If the primary phase is the enemy of poetry, it brings about the antithetical age where poetry can "[c]limb to [its] proper dark" (376). Yeats's own "great war" is, he says, "a war of the past and the future, of a noble past that tries to keep itself unchanged, hoping, perhaps vainly, the deluge will begin some day to fall, that the dove will some day return bringing with it a green bough".⁶³

The desire to reaffirm traditional values is not uncharacteristic of the post-war years; it is the joy of affirmation that has proved for some critics the disturbing element in Yeats's poetry (notably in the Easter 1916 poems and the last poems) refusing as it does to let the suffering of humanity distract him from the vision. Stallworthy suggests that "ugliness and horror have no place" in Yeats's poems about the Easter Rising, as "when blood is mentioned it has a heraldic quality" and, in the Easter 1916 poems, the rhythms reflect "the poet's pride in the heroes whose triumphant sacrifice he

⁶⁰ The automatic writing began in 1917. See *A Vision* 1937, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1962) 8.

⁶¹ See Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 121.

⁶² W.B. Yeats, *A Vision* 85.

⁶³ Quoted in Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 10-11.

celebrates".⁶⁴ Cullingford reads "The Rose Tree" as an indication that "the balance of 'Easter 1916' had given way to defiance", a defiance "carried...to treasonable lengths":⁶⁵

'But where can we draw water,'
Said Pearse to Connolly,
'When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.' (206)

Instead, it may be that both here, and in the last poems, the conflictual nature of Yeats's response to violence does not allow for readings as literal as this, that in fact the main difficulty of "The Rose Tree", and of "Sixteen Dead Men", lies in ascertaining what the "speaker's" sentiments are; "The Rose Tree"'s dialogic nature casts the "speaker" as, in fact, the "listener", eavesdropping on the plot. Yeats is not equating himself with the rebels, nor is he trapped within their mind-set. His concern is to explore the consciousness of the people involved in Easter 1916. Perhaps horror does have a place in these poems, but it is the fascinated horror of Yeats recognising what Cullingford later calls the "dichotomy between his private and his prophetic stance",⁶⁶ and, because experience has forced awareness of the horrific results of their mind-set, retaining, through the "heraldic quality" and rhythm of the poems, some distance between himself and the sentiments expressed.

Elizabeth Cullingford discusses "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", "Reprisals", and "Meditations in Time of Civil War" in terms of the ways in which they reflect Yeats's changing political sympathies: "An Irish Airman", Yeats insisted "was written to express Protestant patriotism towards Ireland", though it ends by praising the "lonely impulse of delight";⁶⁷ "Reprisals" is a poem written with a political purpose,⁶⁸

⁶⁴ "W.B. Yeats and Wilfred Owen" 213.

⁶⁵ *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 99.

⁶⁶ Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 161.

⁶⁷ *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 107.

⁶⁸ Yeats wrote of the poem: "I thought it might touch some one individual mind of a man in power". Quoted in Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 107.

and indicates Yeats's "loathing of the Tans and Auxies";⁶⁹ "Meditations", on the other hand, "reflects his lack of partisanship" on the Treaty issue.⁷⁰ Thus, she describes "Reprisals" as "a complement and answer to 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death'" in that "[t]he behaviour of the Black and Tans invalidates even the 'lonely impulse of delight'".⁷¹ Yeats is, in effect, claiming disillusionment:

Yet rise from your Italian tomb,
Flit to Kiltartan cross and stay
Till certain second thought have come
Upon the cause you served, that we
Imagined such a fine affair:
Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery
Are murdering your tenants there.⁷²

The phrase "we / Imagined such a fine affair" is, however, ambiguous. If Yeats is disillusioned, it is because he succumbed to the 1914 illusions about the nature of the Great War, and the nature of England and English promises. But he was not under any such illusions: he describes the war early on as "bloody frivolity"⁷³ rather than a fine affair, and leaves the question of whether "England may keep faith" unanswered even in 1916. Also, the fact that the "fine affair" was "imagined" suggests a poetic role in shaping consciousness: by implication, Yeats could be the creative deceiver as well as the victim of deceit. If "[i]n dreams begins responsibilities",⁷⁴ Gregory's "good death" has been undermined because in holding to his dreams he abandons his responsibilities: "battle joy may be so dear / A memory, even to the dead, / It chases other thoughts away."⁷⁵ There is inevitably a contradiction here. Yeats's tragic hero is also a man who neglects his own kind, yet in "An Irish Airman" it would be irresponsible of him to do otherwise. "Reprisals" does not rewrite "An Irish Airman": if both poems are, in a

⁶⁹ Yeats, *Ireland and Fascism* 108.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 112.

⁷¹ Ibid. 107.

⁷² *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 791.

⁷³ "To Henry James," 20 Aug. [1915], *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 600.

⁷⁴ Quoted in W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* 112.

⁷⁵ "Reprisals," *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* 791.

sense, self-indulgent, "Reprisals" indulges the "private" rather than the "prophetic" Yeats.

While agreeing with Cullingford that these poems reveal Yeats's shifting political sympathies in response to certain historical events, they also illustrate a developing approach to dealing more generally with the subject of war. Shortly after Robert Gregory's death, J.B. Yeats writes to his son:

The way to be happy is to forget yourself. That is why Robert Gregory was happy....Yet there are two ways of forgetting yourself and two ways of being happy. To forget yourself as in the war, seeing nothing but its vastness....Or to forget yourself in some movement for reform....Yet there is another way of self-forgetting which does not require any enormous machinery such as sanguinary war. It is of course that of art and Beauty....

Now you see the antagonism between a state of war and the practice of art and literature. (War) offers an easier way of forgetting yourself and willing to be happy we grasp at it with eagerness, and all the poets desert the difficult paths they have been climbing; it is so much easier to carry a rifle and a knapsack than to try to write poetry.⁷⁶

If "An Irish Airman" glorifies the first of these "ways of forgetting", and "Reprisals" subsequently questions it, "Meditations in Time of Civil War" takes the conflict between prophetic and private stance, poet and man of action, and transforms it into the subject of the poem. A universally held belief of those who fought in the Great War was that their experience could not be understood by anyone who had not "been through hell". Edmund Blunden, in the "Preliminary" to *Undertones of War*, spoke for many when he claimed "no one will read it who is not already aware of all the intimations and discoveries in it...by reason of having gone the same journey. No one? Some, I am sure; but not many. *Neither will they understand* - that will not be all my fault."⁷⁷ Yeats grasps in the Civil War what his English counterparts do not always understand in the Great War: the unbridgeable gap between the soldiers' experience and his own. As a result, the distance has to be turned into a dialectical strength. If the anti-heroic has reached its zenith in the primary age, then to resist anti-heroism becomes an heroic

⁷⁶ J.B. Yeats, "To W.B. Yeats," 10 June 1918, *Letters to his son W.B. Yeats and Others 1869-1922*, ed. Joseph Hone (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983) 247-48.

⁷⁷ 1928 (London: Penguin, 1982) 7.

gesture in itself, indicating a fidelity to the concepts of the aristocratic era that conflict will bring about. In "Meditations in Time of Civil War", the soldier at Yeats's door is "An affable Irregular, / A heavily-built Falstaffian man" (229). While the issues at stake are of "Shakespearean" magnitude, the heroic and the tragic ground has been reserved not for the soldier but for the poet, who regards the Civil War "as if it were some phenomenon of nature".⁷⁸ If it appears initially that war has written Yeats out of history - "I complain / Of the foul weather, hail and rain, / A pear-tree broken by the storm" (230) - it is detachment from contemporary violence that makes his final gesture, to "turn away and shut the door" (232), an heroic action, a "lonely impulse of delight". Bergonzi suggests that after the Great War, particularly in English writing, "heroism, as a kind of behaviour, might still be possible, but not the rhetoric and gestures of heroism".⁷⁹ Yeats circumvents this judgement: "Meditations" asserts heroic attitude over heroic action, and refuses to admit the impossibility of either.

The assertion of heroism, the conflict set up between noble poet and ignoble war (or world), also resonates in the last poems. Yeats oscillates between finding and losing themes, between pity and prophecy. Yet the theme, or image, he elects to keep is not a denial of a previous aesthetic confidence, it is the same confidence disguised as insanity or humility: "I must lie down where all the ladders start, / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." (392). In "A Crazy Girl", the girl "Hiding amid the cargo of a steamship, / Her knee-cap broken" makes "No common intelligible sound" but is "A beautiful lofty thing, or a thing / Heroically lost, heroically found" (349). Heaney suggests that in "The Man and the Echo", "the voice of conscience and remorse opposes itself to the artistic choice that the old man has lived out all his life" and the final "anguished cry of a rabbit" symbolises this voice:⁸⁰

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck,

⁷⁸ "To T. Sturge Moore," 15 Aug. [1922], *W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence* ed. Ursula Bridge (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978) 46.

⁷⁹ *Heroes' Twilight* 222.

⁸⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1984) 111.

Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought. (395)

Heaney's reading of "The Man and the Echo" might be compared to Herbert Read's "Fear", where, Bergonzi suggests, Read is "confronting the ever-present possibility of...the overthrow of Hotspur by Falstaff"⁸¹:

All goes well
so long as you tune the instrument
to simulate composure

(So you will become
a gallant gentleman.)

But when the strings are broken,
then you will grovel on the earth
and your rabbit eyes
will fill with the fragments of your shatter'd soul.⁸²

But the soul, for Yeats, should be "in division from itself", one of the "two eternities" (398), the two themes, that negotiate and compete through the poetry. The cry of the stricken rabbit might be the cry of humanity, of the frightened victim, and the voice of conscience, but it is also, and has to be, the point where the poem ends and the poet has lost his theme. If he is to respond to contemporary events with pity, it might be at the expense of the hard-won position as prophet of tragic joy whose "last kiss is given to the void".⁸³ Ultimately, the theme, like the girl, is "[h]eroically lost, heroically found".

III.

For Yeats, the poetry is in the conflict, never in the pity. That position is one learned, or constructed, partly in response to the Great War. It is also, paradoxically, a position which has encouraged the view that Yeats's work can dissociated from the Great War. As Eksteins points out, "[t]he bourgeois literature of disenchantment with the war

⁸¹ *Heroes' Twilight* 74.

⁸² Herbert Read, *Collected Poems* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd., n.d.) 35.

⁸³ "To T. Sturge Moore," 17 Apr. [1929], *W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence* 154.

wallowed in pity” and Yeats, like Pound, had “no tolerance for so ignoble a sentiment”.⁸⁴ Poems such as “The Gyres” or “The Statues” would bear this out: “Irrational streams of blood are staining earth....We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.” (337). The poet exists here in contradistinction to the “filthy modern tide” (376) of humanity. But the context of Eksteins’ remarks is problematical:

The Nietzschean invocation to “live dangerously” became the sole commandment of Nazism....To live dangerously means never to accept the status quo; it means to act the adversary constantly; it means to exaggerate, to provoke. It means permanent conflict. “Nazism is,” said Hitler, “a doctrine of conflict.”

In this *Weltanschauung*, pity, compassion, the Sermon on the Mount, all become relics. Pity was nothing but bourgeois sentimentality, said Goebbels....If this kind of memory of the war and if bourgeois decadence in general were to be overcome, there could be no room for pity.⁸⁵

The translation of subjective experience into symbol is, in a way, hijacked and transformed through the 1920s and 1930s into a political philosophy which Yeats, on a personal level, could not condone. In effect, he risks being caught between a poetry of which he does not entirely approve, wallowing in “pity”, and an aesthetic principle that might ultimately bind him to cause and state, an aesthetic principle of invisible warfare that becomes visible experience.

But, crucially, Stan Smith points out the “central contradiction of Yeats’s poetry in the 1920s”: “*The Tower*, which Yeats spoke of as ‘evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power’, nevertheless carries with it...a message of failure and defeat”.⁸⁶ In April 1929, Yeats wrote that Ezra Pound “confirmed a conception I have had for many years, a conception that has freed me from British liberalism and all its dreams. The one heroic sanction is that of the last battle of the Norse Gods, of a gay struggle without hope. Long ago I used to puzzle Maud Gonne by always avowing ultimate defeat as a test.”⁸⁷ This “conception” proves an immensely

⁸⁴ *Rites of Spring* 314.

⁸⁵ *Rites of Spring* 313-14.

⁸⁶ Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 163.

⁸⁷ “To T. Sturge Moore,” 17 Apr. [1929], *W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence* 154.

useful one for Yeats: it is a way, possibly the only way, in which he can separate himself from a failed philosophy (and political system) without resorting, like so many poets in the inter-war years, to communism or socialism as the only viable alternative; and with "[l]ong ago" he claims implicitly to have pre-empted the failure of British liberalism in the early 1920s - events between 1914 and 1922 serve not to change his opinion but only to prove his instinct right.

The claim is, in a way, much more significant when one considers that Yeats finds British liberalism to be a failure at the same time, or even after, many British liberals do. The experience of warfare between 1914 and 1918, and the unjustifiably harsh Imperialist demands of the Versailles Treaty placed an intolerable strain on British liberalism. Warfare, when it came in 1914, highlighted the central contradiction in liberal ideology - its refusal to pursue the theory of individualism to its logical conclusion - and in doing so served to reveal the extent to which liberalism was obliged to compromise that ideology to retain political power. As a result of compromise and confusion, the Liberal party suffered a loss of credibility from which it never recovered. The liberalism which dominated British "democracy" from the mid-nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Great War disappeared, in name at any rate, from the political scene in 1923 with a move towards socialism. Yeats's "freedom" from the liberal dilemma is also a claimed freedom from the moral questions engendered by war. It accepts that ideas of progress have been destroyed in the Great War, and proposes instead a progress in reverse, one that works on the premise that to lose is to gain: "Our literary movement would be worthless but for its defeat."⁸⁸ "[O]ptimistic perfectibilism", which characterised the nineteenth and early twentieth-century liberal mind was, as Andrew Vincent points out, "dashed on the fields of the Somme", leading to a loss of hope about the future of mankind.⁸⁹ Loss of hope for Yeats on the other hand is transformed into an element in the dialectical strength of his aesthetic; he engages, then, as completely, if more obliquely, than others, with the unresolved issues raised by the Great War, or, more

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 53.

accurately, by the political thinking informing the Great War, as they affect the Western world.

Such engagement has too often been seen as the preserve of the “war poets” (by which is meant the soldier poets of the First World War), where the mere fact that a response to war exists can be seen as sufficient in itself, and therefore exempt from ordinary critical judgement (“[t]here is”, Yeats writes, “every excuse” for Owen’s supposed poetic inadequacies); in contrast, the fact that Yeats responds to the war takes second place behind the disputes concerning the politics implicit in the response: from both perspectives, a certain amount of reductive misinterpretation takes place. In spite of Yeats’s criticisms of what he himself terms the “war poets”, the concessions he makes in view of the extremity of their situation (which do not extend to their advocates), and his attempt to dissociate himself from their “tradition”, a tradition Yeats defines (constructs?) prior to dissociation, the poetry of Yeats, perhaps more than that of any of his contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s, goes some way to prove the unhelpfulness of the description, and to indicate that war poetry, like war, probably needs rescuing from its friends as well as its enemies.

In a way, the fate of the “war poets” is paradigmatic of the fate of war in twentieth-century history. Clausewitz’s theory on war may have been accepted (at least up to 1914) but it has not necessarily been consistently applied. Von Strandmann argues that from the Second World War onwards, the character of warfare has changed to the extent that Clausewitz’s theory of the nexus between war and politics is no longer applicable: nuclear potential deprives war of any rational or justifiable basis.⁹⁰ But certainly as regards the First World War, technological developments were, paradoxically, seen as an anachronism: the justification and strategy of war remained unchanged from the nineteenth century. Clausewitz argues, famously, that:

War is only a part of political intercourse, therefore by no means an independent thing in itself. We know, certainly, that War is only called forth through the political intercourse of Governments and Nations; but in general

⁹⁰ Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, “History and War,” *The Institution of War*, ed. Robert A. Hinde (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992) 50-55.

it is supposed that such intercourse is broken off by War, and that a totally different state of things ensues, subject to no laws but its own. We maintain, on the contrary, that War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means....War is an instrument of policy; it must necessarily bear its character, it must measure with its scale: the conduct of War, in its great features, is therefore policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own laws.⁹¹

The tendency with the Great War has been to grant it an exceptional status and a life of its own quite separate from the policy actually controlling events - "the War had won and would go on winning". It has the appearance of irrationality, whereas in fact the calculation of how many men were expendable was weighed up and found to be a rational programme in view of the advantages to be gained by continuing the war: a plea of irrationality might be in some way a denial of culpability. The apocalyptic imagery deployed by those who encouraged enlistment entails an elevation of the war from natural (political) to supernatural status: "We are fighting...for Christ against anti-Christ. And so the battle is not ours, it is indeed Armageddon."⁹² In a way, then, the emphasis placed on the uniquely devastating character of the Great War, its profound and unprecedented impact on culture, can obscure the contextual reality of the war. It becomes marginalised because, as an event, it attains a unique status within history. War *qua* war may deceptively be seen as an end in itself. To confront the reality of the Great War, not just the brutality and the death-toll with which everyone is so familiar, but the political and cultural reality which inspired and informed those events (as Eksteins does in *Rites of Spring*) is to interrogate the condition of mankind in the twentieth century in a way that encompasses other battlegrounds beyond those which can tie down the "war poet" in mud, trenches and helplessness. Ironically, the event which stands out in twentieth-century history is also the event whose literature is perceived as being in some way alien to the twentieth-century literary tradition: this would explain Graves's feeling that his war experience left him marginalised, that while he was playing a part in momentous historical change, T.S. Eliot, in his London cafés, was poised to project

⁹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Routledge, 1949) 121, 130.

⁹² An Anglican Dean quoted in *The Institution of War* 90.

great literary change on the world. The Great War is not a temporary aberration in the normal progression of civilisation, it is part of that progression. But as liberal confusion indicates, it necessitates a redefinition of ideas of progress. To alter the boundaries, as liberals did during the Great War, when issues such as conscription made it impossible to respect in traditional fashion the “realm of the private”⁹³ only deals with the problem temporarily. Talk about progress and individualism did not end in 1914, but neither did the policies which made a mockery of both.

Whatever the implications for liberal thought post-1918, to consider the Great War in isolation from its political context is to reconstruct history in a way which makes it a potentially safer arena for and from poetry. Thus, “war poetry” which refers primarily to the Great War, can be hermetically sealed off (in various anthologies) in spite of the amount of attention paid to it. Like war, it is sanitised if it is perceived in isolation: whatever its social and political criticisms, “war poetry” will not bring about change if these criticisms can be confined to an emergency situation. As Simon Featherstone points out, “[t]he very term ‘war poetry’ risks the isolation of the work within the artificial enclosure of the war years, and suggests a kind of writing relevant only to the extraordinary circumstance of war”.⁹⁴ It risks perpetuating the notion that “the politics of war are fundamentally different to the politics of peace”.⁹⁵ Instead, Featherstone argues convincingly, in a corrective to long-standing views about war poetry, that it needs to be read as political poetry.⁹⁶ Owen’s and Sassoon’s poetry, he maintains, should be read as criticism of “the betrayal of the individual by the state”.⁹⁷ To demand a different court of appeal for the soldier poets may be in some way to do them an injustice in the act of appearing to do the opposite. There is a tendency to read, and praise, their poems as anti-war poems, and, particularly with Owen, as poems of humanitarian protest. The tendency is deceptive since it overlooks the extent to which they were critical of the politics behind the war rather than simply war as an institution.

⁹³ See Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* 48.

⁹⁴ Simon Featherstone, *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 53.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 58.

To consider Yeats's poetry as war poetry is to redefine, or rather to extend, the idea of war to the idea of conflict, of which actual warfare is only one manifestation. John Mueller, considering the institution of war, argues that:

Conflict, like war, is natural. But unlike war, conflict is natural and inevitable because it is impossible for everyone to have exactly the same interests....But peace...is quite compatible with conflict, contentiousness, hostility, racism, inequality, hatred, avarice, calumny, injustice...⁹⁸

To declare opposition to war, allowing for a very few exceptions, generally means holding a contradictory position because, as Michael Howard points out, "war is simply a generic term for the use of armed force by states or aspirants to statehood": one cannot oppose war and yet support a struggle for national liberation for example.⁹⁹ The only thing the poets who fought in the Great War really declare is opposition to a particular war fought in a particular way,¹⁰⁰ and, as a result, they put conflict of interests - between soldier and politician, War and Christianity, front and home, just and unjust war - which, under the enormous external pressure of their situation, translates into resistance, at the heart of the aesthetic.

Clausewitz suggests that war is merely "another kind of writing and language for political thought", that although it has "a grammar of its own...its logic is not peculiar to itself".¹⁰¹ "[W]ar", Wallace Stevens writes, "is only a part of a war-like whole",¹⁰² and it is primarily in this sense that it appears in Yeats's poetry. Not only that, but conflict is defined by Yeats as the source of poetry: "All creation is from conflict, whether with our own mind or with that of others, and the historian who dreams of bloodless victory wrongs the wounded veterans".¹⁰³ As a result, he forges, as

⁹⁸ "War: Natural, But Not Necessary," *The Institution of War* 24-5.

⁹⁹ Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (London: OUP, 1981) 134.

¹⁰⁰ Sassoon's 1917 Declaration against the War, for example, is often read as a pacifist statement, but it is in reality an objection to the reasoning behind the Great War, not war *per se*: "I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest....I am not protesting against the conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed." Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* 1937 (London: Faber, 1972) 496.

¹⁰¹ *On War* 122.

¹⁰² Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber, 1960) 21.

¹⁰³ *Autobiographies* 576.

much as finds, opposition in his world, and claims openly that he would do so to enable his work: "If I found myself a director of men's consciences, or becoming any kind of idealized figure in their minds, I would, or I fancy that I would, display or even exaggerate my frailties."¹⁰⁴

His poetry and opinions war between themselves, from poem to poem, even within a poem, and also wage war upon the pressures of reality. But related to a doctrine of conflict, and perceived as problematising it, are the comments he made concerning "real" warfare: "Desire some just war, that big house and hovel, college and public-house...may know that they belong to one nation."¹⁰⁵ "Some just war" is characteristically vague: actual war, when it does appear, always fails, like the actual Ireland, to live up to Yeats's expectations of it. He labours in the service of an "imaginary Ireland";¹⁰⁶ he might just as well claim to labour in the service of an imaginary war. His "prepare for war" attitudes are disconcerting only because with characteristic arrogance he ignores the context in which they are made: the war desired, the "just war", could only stem from an Ireland which does not exist. To prove his point, and probably out of perversity, he selects an example from the Great War which suggests the "victory of the skilful, riding their machines as did the feudal knights their armoured horses" rather than of the "drilled and docile masses":¹⁰⁷ "During the Great War Germany had four hundred submarine commanders, and sixty per cent of the damage done was the work of twenty-four men",¹⁰⁸ a reading of the Great War which has if nothing else the virtue of originality. "Just war" in the way in which he requires it, must depend on just context: war cannot effect change unless the conditions for its own existence are in place. When Yeats complains in the Irish Civil War that "[m]en do not know what is, or is not, legitimate war",¹⁰⁹ it is a complaint that they do not know what belief system is worth fighting for: the problem inherent in this is that the belief system

¹⁰⁴ *Autobiographies* 576.

¹⁰⁵ *Explorations* 441.

¹⁰⁶ *E & I* 246.

¹⁰⁷ *Explorations* 425. Echoes of Robert Gregory's heroic role in the Great War return here, despite the backlash of "Reprisals".

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ "To Olivia Shakespear," 18 Dec. [1922], *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 695.

has to be in place if not in power before fighting can even begin. His entire cultural enterprise, his attempt to influence Irish politics through cultural change, is therefore his own form of warfare, or of initiating warfare. As Roy Foster has noted, "only partly joking": "for Yeats's life, the only analyst you need is Clausewitz. And Yeats certainly lived as if following the maxims of the great theorist of war."¹¹⁰ What appears to be problematical in this - a glorification of war - is at least a denial of hypocrisy, and in the context of Yeats's thinking (which separates him from fascist ideology), tends inevitably towards defeat. The only just war is the one which is lost. One is tempted to speculate that if the prevailing trend in the 1920s had been belief in a "gay struggle without hope", Yeats might have advocated the dreams and aspirations of liberalism. Certainly, to castigate Yeats for illiberal views can be a way of denying the history and responsibility of liberal ideology on the grounds of apparently non-totalitarian, non-ideological, (non-existent) consensual politics.

IV.

In the Introduction to *A Vision*, in the "Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends", Robartes says: "prepare for war, prepare your children and all that you can reach, for how can a nation or a kindred without war become that 'bright particular star' of Shakespeare, that lit the roads in boyhood?....Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilisation renewed."¹¹¹ Lucy McDiarmid describes the 1920s to the 1940s as a time when "it seemed urgent to form all beliefs into a system, and to apply the system to immediate social problems".¹¹² Similarly, Michael North describes the perceived challenge facing the post-war poets as the demand for "aesthetic modernism" to "effect the liberation that liberal democracy had promised but failed to deliver".¹¹³ The liberal "misconception", that every individual is, in Auden's words, "an absolute

¹¹⁰ Roy Foster, "Writing a Life of W.B. Yeats," *Irish Review* 21 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 96.

¹¹¹ *A Vision* 52-53.

¹¹² Lucy McDiarmid, *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 13.

¹¹³ *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* 2.

entity independent of all others”¹¹⁴ comes under attack from Eliot, Pound and the Thirties poets. But the alternatives to this view are themselves problematical: what Auden at any rate seems to be criticising is not the social liberalism which predominated between 1906 and 1922, but a classical liberalism that had long since found itself to be a fallacy in terms of its response to *realpolitik*. Almost any “system” would face, when confronted by war, the same dilemmas as British liberalism, unless war became an intrinsic element of the ideology, became, in effect, not a continuation of politics by other means, but the originating means of politics themselves. Such a solution was, or appeared to be found in the fascism that attracted so many supporters in the early 1920s. As Howard explains, “[t]he slogan ‘Fascism means War’ was almost tautological: Fascist ideologies never pretended anything else”.¹¹⁵ Vincent also points out that “liberal tolerance was seen as a cause both of the war and of post-war social distress”, hence recruits to early fascist groups included many who had fought in the Great War.¹¹⁶ The reaction of “liberal tolerance” to the rise of fascism serves to highlight the confusion of its own thinking: war against fascism translated as war against war, and therefore appeared disguised and justified as what it could not possibly be, an anti-war position.

Pound’s and Yeats’s sympathies with fascism are understandable in the climate of the 1920s: fascism proposed a political as well as an aesthetic solution, saw the two, in fact, as mutually dependent. Vincent writes of fascism:

...politically orchestrated violence was given the intellectual gloss of social poetry. Violence had an almost aesthetic appeal....[V]italism could be allied, by almost imperceptible shifts of logic, to all artistic creative experience, via the all-inclusiveness of concepts like intuition and instinct. In the same way that it is difficult to unpack the emotional experience of artistic creation into abstract theory, so equally with heroic, crusading political violence. Violence becomes alchemically transmuted into an aesthetic mystery.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Quoted in North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* 2.

¹¹⁵ *War and the Liberal Conscience* 101.

¹¹⁶ *Modern Political Ideologies* 153.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 154.

But fascism, when it mutates into a doctrine of conflict allied with a militaristic, hegemonic state, becomes the opposite of that which Yeats desires, because rather than effecting liberation, it finds success in the only way which seems possible: to deny that liberation is a requirement since the moral dilemmas liberalism fails to resolve do not, as such, even exist. Yeats travels the authoritative road towards aesthetic freedom, but, as Cullingford shows in *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, even if his politics and aesthetic are inseparable, they are not synonymous with his political activity, which, he claimed, was geared towards the creation of “a modern, tolerant, liberal nation”.¹¹⁸ If poetry is exempt from social obligation, which is not the same as social function, Yeats as senator and national cultural figure is not.

In *A Vision*, Yeats does, as McDiarmid suggests, form his beliefs into a system, but he draws the line at attempting to apply this system directly to social problems, an attempt which would almost certainly have taken him further down the fascist road than he ever really travelled. The necessity to confront such problems is not overridden as such, but is certainly placed in a different perspective by the existence of a Great Wheel of Fate beyond human control. In its conflict with society, *A Vision* does suggest the possibility of bringing about social change: the conflict between text and context, poet and society, is a microcosmic image of the moving and conflicting gyres of history, where change in one involves change in the other, and Yeats describes *A Vision* retrospectively as “stylistic arrangements of experience”,¹¹⁹ a phrase which seems to suggest that art, or life, can be perfectly ordered. But, as North points out, while it is “easy to see a connection between an aesthetic drive for reconciliation and authoritarian politics”, the power of Yeats’s aesthetic comes from “the frustration of a passionate desire to resolve the contradictions of modern politics”.¹²⁰ Yeats therefore gives to his “stylistic arrangements” that which, as Ellmann notes, his earlier symbols had lacked, a “furious movement”.¹²¹ As North goes on to say, “[t]here is no reconciliation”.¹²²

¹¹⁸ W.B. Yeats, quoted in Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* 165.

¹¹⁹ *A Vision* 25.

¹²⁰ *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* 20.

¹²¹ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1954) 161-62.

¹²² *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* 73.

“The whole system” of *A Vision*, Yeats writes in the second version, “is founded upon the belief that the ultimate reality, symbolised as the Sphere, falls in human consciousness...into a series of antinomies.”¹²³ That belief pervades also the earlier text, where conflict is the only constant. Perhaps more revealing than his later summary is the comment: “Without...continual Discord through Deception there would be no conscience, no activity; Deception is a technical term of my teachers and may be substituted for ‘desire’. Life is an endeavour, made vain by the four sails of its mill, to come to a double contemplation, that of the chosen Image, that of the fated Image.”¹²⁴ Desire is deception because it only exists while it remains thwarted, and so the “organisational principle” here has to be that of discord. Even if the desire for reconciliation of opposites and contradictions is present in Yeats’s writing, the desire itself is in some way a creation of an opposite since it implicitly condemns the society and the existing aspirations of the time as fragmentary, and sets itself up as an alternative possibility, resisting rather than reflecting. If Yeats has overcome the moral questions raised by war in *A Vision*, then he has done so not by denying but by making a kind of virtue out of their existence: there will always be unjust wars because without them there could not be just war; democracy will always struggle with its own philosophies at the end of its era of “civilisation”, or there would not be the autocracy that brought democracy about; love and war go hand in hand and come from the same source.

A Vision does not work primarily as a political or social system, nor is the doctrine of conflict at its centre meant to work that way. Rather it is an adaptable poetics, and one which affirms its transcendental status only by constant re-negotiation with, rather than attempted imposition on, the political and cultural scene. It is, in a way, a poetics of war, one which applauds noble warfare and aristocratic virtues and opposes them to an age of democracy and unjust wars. As Wallace Stevens, also a great apologist for the imagination in time of war, writes in 1942:

¹²³ *A Vision* 187.

¹²⁴ *A Vision* 94.

For the sensitive poet, conscious of negations, nothing is more difficult than the affirmations of nobility and yet there is nothing that he requires of himself more persistently, since in them and their kind, alone, are to be found those sanctions that are the reason for his being and for that occasional ecstasy, or ecstatic freedom of mind, which is his special privilege.

It is hard to think of a thing more out of time than nobility. Looked at plainly it seems false and dead and ugly....[W]e turn away from it as from something repulsive and particularly from the characteristic that it has a way of assuming: something that was noble in its day, grandeur that was, the rhetorical once. But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same....It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.¹²⁵

In 1922, Yeats speculates: "I wonder will literature be much changed by that most momentous of events, the return of evil." In the same letter, he says that he himself "write[s] better for all the uncertainty".¹²⁶

At the end of the first version of *A Vision*, Yeats writes "Finished at Thoor Ballylee, 1922, in a time of Civil War".¹²⁷ It is curious that he finds it necessary to state this, as if it adds something to an understanding of the text, and as if to reinforce the view that the vision is forged in response, and as a counter to, war. The phrase also conjures up an image, however inaccurate, of the poet in his tower, stylistically arranging experience into a Yeatsian *Weltanschauung*, while battle rages around (beneath) him. *A Vision* is closely intertwined with the poetry that arose out of the philosophy and the war experience combined. There are poems in Yeats's work which appear to be more closely tied to *A Vision*, and even some which are, as Yeats points out, "unintelligible" without certain elements of the original version,¹²⁸ but underneath the "harsh geometry"¹²⁹ of *A Vision* is an aesthetic vision crucial to *The Tower*, the poetry which it made possible. If *A Vision* is a poetics of war, *The Tower* contains the poetry which has the greatest claim to be called war poetry.

¹²⁵ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* 35-36.

¹²⁶ "To Olivia Shakespear," [? Apr. 1922], *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 680.

¹²⁷ *A Vision* 184.

¹²⁸ See *A Vision* 19.

¹²⁹ *E & I* 518. The geometry offers, Yeats notes, only "an incomplete interpretation" of the vision to which it aspires.

Fussell explains the problem confronting the poets who fought in the First World War as one of language:

finding the war “indescribable” in any but the available language of traditional literature, those who recalled it had to do so in known literary terms. Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence, Pound, Yeats were not present at the front to induct them into new idioms which might have done the job better.¹³⁰

What distinguishes the sequence of poems, “The Tower”, “Meditations in Time of Civil War” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is the way in which the possibilities of language and rhetoric are stretched to the limit in order to confront, but not compromise with, the present reality. At times, all three poems begin to sound like a perpetual rehearsal for a voice that cannot appear: any conclusion reached is destabilised, “But I have found an answer” followed by a further question (222), the only guiding principle that of “The Tower” - “As I would question all, come all who can” (221). Stan Smith describes the discourse “repressed in every poem and philosophical vision” as “the discourse of history itself”, a history which, in spite of this repression, “emerges as a vision of terror”.¹³¹ The relationship between history, which is changeable, and the work of art, imaged in “Meditations in Time of Civil War” as Sato’s sword, (or, put another way, between the pressures of visible and invisible warfare) is an immensely ambivalent one, but in the end there is no real question as to the mutual dependence of the two: “only an aching heart / Conceives a changeless work of art” (228). If history is “this filthy modern tide” (376), it has to be given the justice of the full impact of the image: it is not so much repressed as it is a naturally irrepressible force, variable in its impact, that demands constant attention and/or resistance. It is resisted, in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, to mark the limits in language of a moral and political, as well as an aesthetic world beyond those imposed by an empty and ultimately self-defeating rhetoric. The First World War poets, surely confronting the filthy modern tide at its filthiest, lack, as Yeats sees it, psychological distance, which is not necessarily repression; they do not challenge history effectively because they are

¹³⁰ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 174.

¹³¹ *The Origins of Modernism* 205.

swamped by it. The strength of Yeats's example is evident in the frequent echoes of Section II of "Meditations" in Northern Irish poetry:

An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,
Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,
The sound of the rain or sound
Of every wind that blows... (226)

Poetry can only flourish in the space Yeats has cleared for it; in doing so he does not deny the reality of the time, or the difficulty involved ("stony ground"), but he does suggest that the difficulty is an essential part of the flowering as well as an endangerment of it. Adversity, by implication, inspires "[b]efitting emblems of adversity" (227).

The individualist stance, the constant reassertion of the "I" in this sequence of poems,¹³² is illustrative of both the virtue and the problem of the Yeatsian inheritance. At a traumatic time in history, politicians generally accepted the premise that it was better to be wrong with the people than right against them: this ultimate compromise of principle was made by liberals in England at the outbreak of war as a means of retaining power. Yeats, in contrast, opts for being "right" in the solitary role, and assumes in that role, against the odds, a great deal of power. In "The Tower" and "Meditations", the poet is preoccupied with that which he will leave behind; in both poems, any foreseeable problems with the inheritance are projected on to the inheritors. In "Meditations", initially it might appear as if poetry itself is under threat: "And what if my descendants lose the flower..."; but Yeats pre-empts a possible decline and turns it on its head: "whatever flourish and decline / These stones remain their monument and mine" (229). The poetry will be a testament to history whether it (history) is good (flourishes) or bad (declines). The "curse" - "May...this stark tower / Become a roofless ruin..." - ensures that even decline, over which the poet can have no control, is turned in appearance into combative action, power beyond the grave. The tower stands or falls with the age, but it

¹³² Stan Smith notes that "[t]he 'I' is everywhere in 'The Tower' - from the first impatient question through the obsessive reiterations in the body of the poem - 17 instances in...116 lines...". *The Origins of Modernism* 168.

is less a barometer than a judgement: if it is perceived as a “roofless ruin”, the last gasp of the Ascendancy, then the strength of the indictment is in its absence rather than its presence. It is a view which is highly dependent upon the philosophy of *A Vision*: “The Primum Mobile that fashioned us / Has made the very owls in circles move” (229) - and on the assumption that what goes around comes around. That philosophy cannot easily be condemned as a transcendental search for an ultimate truth; Plato himself is in Yeats’s terms something of a failure because “to die into the truth is still to die”.¹³³ The Yeats of “He Tells of the Perfect Beauty” - “O cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes” (74) - is deconstructed in “Meditations in Time of Civil War” in a retrospect on his own naiveté: the perfect beauty is that which cannot be told, unless the world is shrouded from view by a dense Celtic fog, and inspiration has “Give[n] place to an indifferent multitude...To brazen hawks” (232). Similarly, in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”, “Loie Fuller’s Chinese dancers”, evocative of 1890s decadence, give way to something more reminiscent of a dance of death by men whose “tread / Goes to the barbarous clamour of a gong” (234), men who are manipulated by the gyres of history, but on another level are victims of the politics turning Europe into the place where “evil gathers head” (237). The close relationship between art and war is implicit in this section.¹³⁴

The swan, in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is the perfect image of the ambivalence informing Yeats’s position:

Some moralist or mythological poet
 Compares the solitary soul to a swan;
 I am satisfied with that,
 Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,
 Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,
 An image of its state;
 The wings half spread for flight,
 The breast thrust out in pride
 Whether to play, or to ride
 Those winds that clamour of approaching night. (234-35)

¹³³ *A Vision* 271.

¹³⁴ Cf. Eksteins’s comparison, in *Rites of Spring*, of armoured lookout men and Dada dancers.

The swan is not simply the “I” in conflict with society, it exists also in reaction to itself reacting to society. Even a portrait as ambiguous as this one finds itself in an implied question (“whether” is ambiguous) born of a struggle in the verse: “I am satisfied”, qualified with “satisfied if”, qualified again with an image formed only through another image, the mirror, to establish nothing more unifying than the dilemma at the heart of all three poems, “[w]hether to play, or to ride...”. Michael North, when he suggests that “the swan thrusts out its breast in pride, the quintessential aristocratic virtue, and rides ‘Those winds that clamour of approaching night’”,¹³⁵ overlooks the fact that if the lines imply a choice, the choice is never made. In *A Vision*, Yeats writes, “The cones of the *tinctures* mirror reality but are in themselves pursuit and illusion...the Sphere is reality”.¹³⁶ The end of pursuit and illusion is perhaps the final image of the swan, an image that unlike its former state is potential not actual, that exists beyond the text:

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
To end all things, to end
What my laborious life imagined, even
The half-imagined, the half-written page. (235)

Heaney’s reading of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, as with “The Man and the Echo”, suggests that Yeats’s inheritors are dominated by a “liberal” conscience seeking resolution. Heaney sees “The Stare’s Nest By My Window” as an affirmation of the truth that “The end of art is peace”. In this poem, he writes:

[Yeats’s] great fur coat of attitude is laid aside, the domineering intellect and the equestrian profile, all of which gain him a power elsewhere, all laid aside. What we have is a deeply instinctive yet intellectually assented-to idea of nature in her benign and nurturant aspect as the first proper principle of life and living. The maternal is apprehended, intimated and warmly cherished...¹³⁷

Heaney works hard here for a humanitarian reading Yeats is always reluctant to offer: the decline in values is more likely to be his subject matter than the incubation of the

¹³⁵ *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* 59.

¹³⁶ *A Vision* 73.

¹³⁷ *Preoccupations* 112.

values themselves in, for example, a stare's nest. The invocation to nature is made first and foremost to strengthen the poet whose "wall is loosening" (230). "The Stare's Nest" is the only section in the poem where the poet is "closed in" (230) - an echo is Owen's "on us the doors are closed".¹³⁸ It is also the only section where he claims to be writing in the midst of, rather than simply in time of, civil war. The obvious conclusion is that poetry struggles in such a position, dominated by the limitations imposed on its own possibilities, and leaves the poet clutching at straws (honey bees). But for Yeats, "the end of art is peace" means, among other things, the end of art. Nature is invoked less as a proper first principle than as a means of sustaining the first principle of poetic strength: the honey bee, in mythology, nourishes Jupiter and Pindar - a god and an ageing lyric poet. The refrain - "O honey-bees, / Come build in the empty house of the stare" (231) - calls for a form of nourishment for the poet, and does so because this section is the only one in which destruction is concrete: "Last night they trundled down the road / That dead young soldier in his blood" (230). It is a point where the poem belies its title of "Meditations"; instead, a moment of heightened consciousness of memory dominates. There are in fact two such moments in this sequence of poems; the other is the close of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen": "There lurches past...That insolent fiend Robert Artisson" (237). The insolent fiend that art has engendered is what we are finally left with - the three poems appear in reverse order of composition¹³⁹ - and although the poet's reaction to both images is one of fascination and recoil, the active rather than the passive image, and, therefore, the one which is a product of imagination, is the one which remains. Changing the order of the poems implies that "The Stare's Nest" has enabled a vision of reality in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", not that it is the vision itself. In "Meditations in Time of Civil War", it is followed by "I see Phantoms of Hatred...". The lines open up again as the poet climbs to the tower top, and sweep with the length and range of the poet's own vision of contemporary realities.

¹³⁸ "Exposure," *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 162.

¹³⁹ The poems are dated as follows - "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", 1919; "Meditations", 1923; "The Tower", 1926 - and were first published in 1919, 1921 and 1927 respectively (see *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* 407-28)

In "The Stare's Nest", the lines "We had fed the heart on fantasies, / The heart's grown brutal from the fare" (230), echo, rather more negatively, "Easter 1916": "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" (204). But the end of "Meditations in Time of Civil War", seems to find an answer to Easter 1916's "O when may it suffice?":

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
In something that all others understand or share;
But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth
A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. (232)

What was "heaven's part" in "Easter 1916", and Wordsworth's childhood vision, can be the ageing man's part as well but only through the introduction of another category: to accept that resolution involves a greater degree of compromise, and to remain "resolutely irresolute" - to "turn away and shut the door". Whichever choice is made, the requirement for making it is acceptance of the fact that there is no such thing as a conscience set at ease.

One reason why Yeats is not considered as a "war poet", at least in relation to the Great War, may be because the tendency has been, deceptively, to equate "war poet" with "anti-war poet", and to judge Great War poetry according to the preoccupations of the famous Great War soldier poets. It is a tendency, in other words, which has sometimes assumed that a form of conscientious objection to war must be inherent in war writing. That Yeats's work does not receive attention in relation to the Great War, in comparison with its perceived response to other historical events, notably the Easter Rising and the Civil War, indicates that the Great War tends to fall between two versions of literary history: in England, the view that the soldier-poet response to the war is a norm by which other responses can be judged; in Ireland, the assumption that the Great War has a minimal impact on indigenous literary development. Yeats's role in propounding the latter view, and his high-profile criticism of the soldier-poet response, should not obscure recognition of the influence of the Great War in the

formation of his aesthetic, notably in the 1920s, or the fact that such influence disrupts the categories he himself endorses.

Chapter 3



Resisting the Canon: Robert Graves and the Anglo-Irish Tradition

*"I feel Somme trenches give me the right even to
blasphemy of the Holy Spirit if I feel so inclined."*

-Robert Graves¹

Derek Mahon suggested in 1974 that:

The time is coming fast, if it isn't already here, when the question, 'Is So-and-so really an *Irish* writer?' will clear a room in seconds. Was Kafka a Czech writer or a German one? Picasso a Spanish painter or a French one? These questions are interesting up to a point, but there is no need to find answers to them. Was Yeats, after all, an Irish poet or an English one? The answer is, both....The question is semantic, and not important except in so far as the writer himself makes it so.²

The comments are made in relation to Louis MacNeice; they serve also as a useful starting point for an understanding of Robert Graves. Mahon's combination of disingenuousness and perceptiveness characterises critical views of Graves's position in Irish and English literary traditions, as much as Mahon's own comments about Graves give the lie to his conclusion above. The question, in other words, is also important in so far as other writers make it so.³ Graves's anthology history is complex; his self-definitions even more so. For Mahon, Graves is "an honorary Irishman at best", an "odd inclusion[s]" in *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*.⁴ In contrast, John Montague includes him in that anthology, gives him more space than he gives to either F.R.Higgins

¹ "To Robert Nichols," 2 Feb. 1917, in *Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1946*, ed. Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982) 66.

² "MacNeice in Ireland and England," *Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 113.

³ Hence, as will be seen, the re-consideration of MacNeice in the light of his influence on contemporary Irish poets.

⁴ Derek Mahon, "Mother Tongue," rev. of *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*, ed. John Montague, *New Statesman* 29 (Mar. 1974): 452.

or John Hewitt, and uses him as a constant reference point in the introduction.⁵ Graves himself claims in 1959 that his poems “have never adopted a foreign accent or colouring; they remain true to the Anglo-Irish poetic tradition into which I was born”.⁶ In the English tradition, Graves is seen as a canonical figure because of *Goodbye to All That* and *I, Claudius*; in recent years he has been excluded altogether from (versions of) the Irish canon.⁷ But although the War is the event which apparently locates him within English history and the English class-system (via *Goodbye to All That*), it is also the event which directs him poetically in a way which has been seen as tangential to the twentieth-century tradition of English poetry. Hence, the first full length study of Graves’s poetry, published in 1960, states, rather confusingly, that “Robert Graves’s place in English poetry is an isolated one”, but that “[t]hough partly Anglo-Irish and partly German by descent, Graves is essentially an English poet”.⁸ And “Anglo-Irish”, Graves’s own perspective, is equally problematical: while it might designate any or all Irish writing in English, it has also been associated more specifically with the Irish Literary Revival and/or the Ascendancy and, as a result, the term “cannot comfortably be applied to most Irish writing after 1922”.⁹ In one sense, then, if Graves is born into an “Anglo-Irish poetic tradition”, the tradition, unlike the poet, does not survive the Anglo-Irish War.

The question is on one level, as Mahon rightly points out, “semantic”. But the semantic quibble is also in this case, as with MacNeice, indicative of the more complex issue of how the poet locates himself, and is located within, history. Graves is, from a critical point of view, relatively neglected on both sides of the Irish Sea, in spite of his popularity.¹⁰ The form of neglect is symptomatic of the canonical confusion surrounding

⁵ See *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (London: Faber, 1974) 24, 29, 34-35

⁶ Foreword, *Collected Poems 1959* (London: Cassell, 1959)

⁷ None of Graves’s work is included in *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: OUP, 1986) or in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991). Nor is there an entry for Graves in *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Welch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁸ J.M. Cohen, *Robert Graves* (London & Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1960) 3.

⁹ *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* 14. For discussion of the history and ramifications of the term “Anglo-Irish Literature” see 13-15.

¹⁰ In view of the amount of ink spilled on the subject of Graves’s work, this might seem a strange thing to suggest. He receives critical attention in most (though not all) studies of First World War

his work. The confusion itself is in part a result of the turbulent history of the war years in Ireland and England and the quest in both countries for a kind of national self-definition. It is also a result of Graves's own self-understanding acquired in response to that past. In other words, perceptions, and self-perceptions, of Graves's place in Irish, English and Anglo-Irish traditions have been distorted, sometimes deliberately, by and in his response to the Great War. Bergonzi suggests that "there is probably much truth in A. Alvarez's suggestion that Graves has never wholly recovered from the Great War and the long ensuing period of spiritual shell-shock; a good deal about his poetic personality suggests this...."¹¹ Kirkham also feels that war-neurosis has had "a long-standing effect on Graves' work" and "has made a permanent impression on his personality".¹² There is undoubtedly a sense in which Graves's aesthetic can be seen as committed solely to the attempt to deal with the effect of the war. That attempt has potentially interesting implications for English and Irish literary traditions, if only because, in the process, anything and everything becomes expendable. His 1916 claim, quoted above, that "Somme trenches give me the right even to blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" is never made so explicitly again, but it hovers behind his entire poetic career.

In 1938, Graves, in "Recalling War", gives what is perhaps his most accessible explanation of what war, more specifically the Great War, symbolised for him in terms of English literature and culture. The poem is later excluded from his *Collected Poems*, as are the majority of what might be categorised his "war poems":

War was return of earth to ugly earth,
War was foundering of sublimities,

poetry, though as a secondary figure in relation to Owen, Rosenberg, or Sassoon. Full length studies of his poetry and prose have appeared in the last thirty years. Journals were and are published devoted solely to Gravesian criticism. But the neglect is of a slightly different kind. He is too often perceived as a transcendental eccentric whose White Goddess thinking seduces a few disciples, but whose influence for most contemporary poets is stylistic only after the 1920s: it is in these terms that his influence on the Movement is acknowledged. Criticism sometimes disappears down an anecdotal or mythological path - see for example George Steven Swan, "Who was Homer's Daughter?" and D.S. Savage, "A Meeting with Robert Graves" in *Focus on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries* 2.2 (Spring 1994):13-15, 17-23 - which tends to sideline his achievements as a poet, notably in terms of his influence on contemporary writing.

¹¹ Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (London: Constable, 1965) 68.

¹² Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (London: Athlone Press, 1969) 7.

Extinction of each happy art and faith
 By which the world had still kept head in air,
 Protesting logic or protesting love,
 Until the unendurable moment struck -
 The inward scream, the duty to run mad.¹³

Michael Kirkham suggests that, while war “was the cause of rapid maturing in Owen and Sassoon...it had the opposite effect on Graves: it did much to retard his development”.¹⁴ It is true that he was unable to produce, or did not attempt to produce, the journalistic, narrative description of the horror (or pity) of war that dominated the aesthetics of Owen and Sassoon, although he accepted that the circumstances of the Great War necessitated the presentation of the experience in poetry since journalism was inadequate to the task.¹⁵ It is also likely that, as Kirkham claims, he was unable “to involve himself in the serious themes of war” if only because the war seemed a “mad joke” undeserving even of scepticism: such a response would be to attribute to the war a status which, for Graves, its innate insanity denied.¹⁶ While Graves might have recognised that First World War poets “felt bound to supplement the rosy official accounts of execrable battles”,¹⁷ as Bergonzi points out, even the anti-war scepticism of Sassoon could potentially be seen to benefit the “Establishment”: Winston Churchill apparently approved of Sassoon’s *Counter-Attack* since it would “bring home to the

¹³ *Selected Poems*, ed. Paul O’Prey (London: Penguin, 1986) 99. Robert Graves published 39 individual volumes of verse, and produced several “Collected Poems”, the first in 1926, the last in 1975. The final version of the Collected Poems is heavily weighted towards his later work, and is far from representative of Graves’s poetic output. An edition of the Complete Poems is currently in progress; thus far, the first volume, consisting of poems from 1910-1926, has appeared. Where possible, quotations of poetry from this period have been taken from the *Complete Poems: Vol I*, ed. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995). However, Graves was also an inveterate reviser. In accordance with his own practice, the *Complete Poems* uses the latest version of a text. In some cases, where discussing revisions or considering Graves’s poetic development, I have chosen to quote from earlier versions as they appeared in *Poems 1914-1926* (London: Heinemann, 1927) cross-referencing to the *Complete Poems*. In addition, *Poems About War*, ed. William Graves (London: Cassell, 1988), made available previously unpublished, or suppressed poems from the First World War era, which will appear in the 3rd volume of the *Complete Poems* in due course, but are not currently available other than in William Graves’s edition. Quotations from the poetry after 1926 have been taken from *Collected Poems* (London: Cassell, 1975) and from *Selected Poems*, ed. Paul O’Prey, which tried to redress some of the omissions of the *Collected Poems*. All quotations are therefore individually annotated.

¹⁴ *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 22.

¹⁵ Robert Graves, “The Poets of World War II,” *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1949) 312.

¹⁶ *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 14.

¹⁷ Graves, “The Poets of World War II,” *The Common Asphodel* 312.

civilian population what the troops at the Front had to endure". It became, in effect, "a subtler form of pro-war propaganda".¹⁸

Owen, in "Strange Meeting", outlines a potential aesthetic, one which the war has denied him:

For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now.
...
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.¹⁹

Graves writes nothing in the Great War to compare with the best of Owen's or Sassoon's verse. Retrospectively, he claims that his only concern is with "truths that lie too deep for taint"; the absence of a poetry of such truths, at least for the duration of the war, indicates that nothing lies too deep for taint, that such a claim can in his case, of necessity, be retrospective only. Yeats "wanted to cry as all men cried, to laugh as all men laughed".²⁰ It would be Owen's desire also, but is sacrificed to the greater need to communicate his point - "The pity of war, the pity war distilled" ("Strange Meeting"). Graves has, at this stage, neither Yeats's imaginative confidence, nor Owen's single-mindedness about his role as a war poet, and the initial result is an imaginative paralysis that treats neither the truth of war, nor truth, with the competence of his contemporaries.

Unlike Sassoon, Graves was never able to betray his commitment to a cause - in this case the First World War - in a way which might have enabled his poetry in the war years. His early responses to the experience of war are surprisingly stereotypical: "I always enjoy trenches in a way, I must confess: I like feeling really frightened and if

¹⁸ Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight* 107.

¹⁹ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) 125.

²⁰ W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1961) 511.

happiness consists in being miserable in a good cause, why then I'm doubly happy. England's is a good cause enough and the trenches are splendidly miserable."²¹ In late 1917, while he might not put it in quite the same terms, he still perceives it to be one's duty to "finish your contract whatever it costs you".²² Graves, along with others, describes the post-war generation as a "lost generation", as:

a generation which the war surprised at its most impressionable stage and taught the necessity for scepticism about the stability of all human relationships, of all national and religious institutions, of all existing moral codes, of all sentimental formulas for future harmony. From the War it also learned a scale of emotional excitement and depression with which no subsequent variations can compete; yet the experience was too nervously destructive to be wished for again.²³

The problem for the poet both during and after the war is that it is not just the experience of war which invalidates "institutions", but also the soldier-poet's ultimate commitment as a soldier to his role within the War. One might almost say that if the War taught scepticism about almost everything that had been previously taken for granted, then paradoxically it demanded, and received, an unparalleled commitment to the War itself as an aberrant substitute for all other institutions. There is, in these terms, no adequate response to the experience of war, at least in any conventional way, since the experience itself invalidates any frame of reference in which the response can be made. But if this is true of the War, it is ultimately true of most experience within twentieth-century history, where the war is only a grotesque concentration of the worst possibilities of modern society: as an event it is unique, but the attitudes it engendered, and the attitudes which made it possible, did not necessarily end with the Armistice. As Graves pointed out in 1926, "[t]he disillusion of the War has been completed by the Peace".²⁴ In this understanding, all institutions and moral certainties - literary, political, religious - remain open to reconstitution or outright rejection even after commitment to the war has ended. In "Peace", written in 1918 before the Armistice, Graves pre-empt

²¹ Robert Graves, "To Edward Marsh," 15 Mar. 1916, *In Broken Images* 43.

²² Robert Graves, "To Siegfried Sassoon," 27 Oct. 1917, *In Broken Images* 85.

²³ *The Common Asphodel* 150.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the permanent condition of post-war generation scepticism, and imagines only two directions in which a “peaceful” world can go: the first is regressive, investigating the possibility that the war can be no more than a “dream” of “[d]espair and darkness”, and men, learning nothing, will “work happily in the sun” thinking “‘It’s all over now’”. The second is regressive also, since it sees repetition of the “emotional excitement and depression”. There is no future as such, only an illusory pre-war state or a state of war:

Will it be over once for all,
 With no more killed and no more maimed;
 Shall we be safe from terror’s thrall,
 The eagle caged, the lion tamed;
 Or will the young of that vile brood,
 The young ones also, suck up blood
 Unconquered, unashamed,
 Rising again with lust and thirst?
 Better we all had died at first,
 Better that killed before our prime
 We rotted deep in earthy slime.²⁵

Anticipating peace differs little, then, from “Recalling War”, since in both “the future we devote / To yet more boastful visions of despair”.²⁶ Sassoon, in “Everyone Sang” captures a moment of tranquillity after the war: “Everyone suddenly burst out singing; / And I was filled with such delight / As prisoned birds must find in freedom”.²⁷ For Graves there is no such moment.²⁸ In “Armistice Day 1918”, the sentiment is not that of “Everyone Sang” (although the majority of people in the poem are “singing”: “Wild laughter down Mafeking Street....flappers gone drunk and indecent”); it is closer to that of Owen’s “The Send-Off” where “A few, a few, too few for drums and yells, // May creep back, silent, to village wells, / Up half-known roads”, or to the question in “Spring Offensive”, “Why speak not they of comrades that went under?”.²⁹ Graves’s “Armistice Day 1918” does not pose this question, nor does it detail the experience of

²⁵ *Poems About War* 67.

²⁶ “Recalling War,” *Selected Poems* 99.

²⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983) 144.

²⁸ “[E]veryone”, he remarked of Sassoon’s poem, “did not include me.” Quoted in Martin Stephen, *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 293.

²⁹ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 149, 170.

battle in a way which pre-empts its answer, but he presents the veterans' silence as a counter to celebration:

But there's old men and women in corners
With tears falling fast on their cheeks,
There's the armless and legless and sightless-
It's seldom that one of them speaks.

....

But the boys who were killed in the trenches,
Who fought with no rage and no rant,
We left them stretched out on their pallets of mud
Low down with the worm and the ant.³⁰

Although he moves away from the attempted realism of his early war verse to a style reminiscent of nursery rhyme and folk-song, and claims in a letter to Sassoon in August 1918 that "[w]orrying about the war is no longer a sacred duty",³¹ whether or not he regards it as a sacred duty, to cease "worrying" about the war is not as simple as his attitude here might suggest. What Graves faces in 1918 (when, he claims in *Goodbye to All That*, he first began to think for himself) is a problem the war brings to his attention, and which he later identifies as existing for all "modernist" poetry: how to "distinguish false modernism, or faith in history, from genuine modernism, or faith in the immediate performances of poems as not necessarily derived from history" or "from conscientious attendance on the time-spirit".³² His war poems are later suppressed because they are, as he sees it, written largely out of attendance on the time-spirit. As he points out himself, "It's a Queer Time" was written before he had seen active service, despite its "steel and fire...roaring" and its "struggling, gasping, struggling".³³ It is the fault for which he castigates Sassoon in 1918: "you seem to think that there are more people who love war than there really are in this fifth year of war with our three and a

³⁰ *Poems About War* 70.

³¹ "To Siegfried Sassoon," 26 Aug. 1918, in *Broken Images* 101.

³² *The Common Asphodel* 126. Graves misleadingly conflates "history" and "the time-spirit" here. Attendance upon the time-spirit means, in effect, either succumbing to, or challenging, the sentimental formulas and moral codes of the era. So in claiming that poems should not necessarily be derived from history is a way of saying that poetry should not be propagandist, either in the Jessie Pope sense, or the Siegfried Sassoon sense. To criticise poetry derived from history is not to say that a poem does not derive from within history.

³³ *Complete Poems* 20. The poem was written at the regimental depot in Wales a few weeks before Graves first went to France (May 1915). See Robert Graves "The Poets of World War II," *The Common Asphodel* 308.

half million casualty list. And poetry shouldn't be all propaganda because a war is on".³⁴ But in doing so he disguises his own inability to find, in the immediate aftermath of the War, a successful alternative to the realism of Sassoon and Owen. When the war is over, Graves recognises that "[w]ar-poetry is played out...commercially" and that "Country Sentiment is the most acceptable dope now, and this is the name I've given my new poems".³⁵ One might read this attitude, in so far as it can be taken seriously, as indicative of the "false modernism" which receives his explicit criticism in 1926 but is also implicitly criticised in his comments to Sassoon in 1918. It is certainly not something Graves would say about his own work, even in jest, only a few years later, since it implies a commercialised detachment from the act of writing that the "Muse-poet" cannot have.

The Great War provides, for Graves, an "easy example of unusually violent flow and ebb in the sea of literary criticism". It is, he writes, "possible to read that history without much prejudice and to see how the national aesthetic canons of good and bad corresponded closely with, and were no more stationary than national political sentiment".³⁶ Lingering attendance upon the time-spirit may be inevitable if participation in the war urges on the individual the repression of internal struggle in the interests of national endeavour. Sorley recognises this in 1915 when he writes:

I can now understand the value of dogma, which is the General Commander-in-chief of the mind. I am now beginning to think that free thinkers should give their minds into subjection, for we who have given our actions and volitions into subjection gain such marvellous rest thereby. Only of course it is the subjecting of their powers of will and deed to a wrong master on the part of a great nation that has led Europe into war. Perhaps afterwards, I and my likes will again become indiscriminate rebels. For the present we find high relief in making ourselves soldiers.³⁷

J.B. Priestley, in 1914, saw the outbreak of war as "a conscription of the spirit...a challenge to...untested manhood",³⁸ but the spirit is then betrayed by the nature of the

³⁴ "To Siegfried Sassoon," 26 Aug. 1918, *In Broken Images* 101.

³⁵ Robert Graves, "To Edmund Blunden," 12 July 1919, *In Broken Images* 113.

³⁶ Robert Graves, *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925) 18-19.

³⁷ Quoted in Arthur E. Lane, *An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1972) 84.

³⁸ Quoted in Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight* 32.

Great War itself. War thus becomes the enemy of poetry, and involvement in war complicates the inclusion of war in poetry as an ingredient of conflict. Graves can only incorporate the experience of war into poetry with any degree of success if it is recast in personal, or, finally, mythic terms, where the spirit can be conscripted not by war or by peace, but by a Muse who embodies both extremes and who will, metaphorically speaking, challenge untested manhood to the limit. Rebellion comes, as Sorley thought it would, after the event, although it would be naïve to assume that when the individual's subjection to war has ceased, war will also cease its imposition on freedom of thought. As a result, conflict, the divided self, is almost inevitably the main ingredient of Graves's poetry, and is articulated in various ways - psychological, geographical, allegorical, mythical - and with varying degrees of success in maintaining the tension between contrary impulses that Kirkham sees as giving his best poetry its "unique character".³⁹ In Owen's "Strange Meeting", the enemy is "the other", the alter-ego, but there is no virtue in confrontation beyond a recognition that the form of confrontation is negative and unproductive: its resolution comes only with the line "Let us sleep now....". Graves, writing in 1925, seeks from the divided self a form of reconciliation in life not in death, or between life and death:

Poetry [is] a record of the conflicts between various pairs of Jekyll and Hyde, or...a record of the solution of these conflicts....In the period of resolution there will be no discrepancy between latent content and manifest statement, and the rival parties will only appear as historical antinomies out-of-dated by what has happened since.⁴⁰

"The Pier-Glass", in its original form, is, as Kirkham describes it, "a proud refusal of the escapist solution".⁴¹ Graves himself describes the poems in *The Pier-Glass* as "half a reaction against shell-shock by indulging in a sort of *dementia praecox*...of fantastic daydreams...half...an attempt to stand up to the damned disease and write an account of it".⁴² "The Pier-Glass" falls into the second category; the cracked mirror gives back a

³⁹ *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 9.

⁴⁰ *Poetic Unreason* 52-53.

⁴¹ *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 49.

⁴² Robert Graves, "To Edmund Blunden," 10 Mar. 1921, *In Broken Images* 124.

reflection of the “schizophrenic” nature of experience and forces recognition of the poet’s own history:

A sullen pier-glass cracked from side to side
Scorns to present the face as do new mirrors
With a lying flush, but shows it melancholy
And pale, as faces grow that look in mirrors.

The poem was later revised to cut the second half where Graves finds the plea of the first half “granted; death prevails not yet”, but finds the further question: “A paltry question set on the elements / Of love and the wronged lover’s obligations? / Kill or forgive?” which is answered with:

...Still does the bed ooze blood?
Let it drip down till every floor-plank rot!
Yet shall I answer, challenging the judgement:-
“Kill, strike the blow again, spite what shall come.”⁴³

He is obeying here the by now instinctive “duty to run mad”, because there is no easy option: one cannot choose “True life, natural breath” instead of “this phantasma” (or vice versa); the two go hand in hand. If the first half of the poem records the Jekyll and Hyde conflict, between real and desired perceptions of self, then the second half attempts and fails a solution (though its final strength is in its failure). The revision of the poem leaves the original wish - “that there still abides...True life, natural breath” - as an unanswered question, but one which is, presumably, “out-of-dated” by what has happened since in his poetry. In other words, it finds a “resolution” by presenting only a part of the original “experience” of looking in the pier-glass; that of the neurasthenic poet desiring a contrary reality, and, in framing the wish, at least admitting the possibility of its existence. “In Broken Images” points the virtue rather than the problem of internal conflict, or rather it recognises that the two exist simultaneously. The poet, in acknowledging the limitations of intellect and reason gains both understanding and confusion. He is, therefore, as Graves later describes him, “‘Poor Devil’ or ‘Lucky Devil’; it does not matter which you call him - the coin spins evenly”.⁴⁴ There is, or

⁴³ *Poems 1914-1926* 71-73. Revised, shortened version in *Complete Poems* 118-19.

⁴⁴ Robert Graves, *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London: Cassell, 1962) 24.

course, in this poem, a right way and a wrong way, but perhaps they are not irreconcilable:

He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I am slow, thinking in broken images.

He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.

Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.

Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact;
Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.

When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.

He continues quick and dull in his clear images;
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.⁴⁵

The division in the poet lies in his understanding of relative and absolute truth: his experience within history, as society would define history, is of the former, and it is by relative truths, under the guise of scientism, that he is required to live, but as a poet his aim must be the latter, to concern himself with “final truth only” not the truth which is “a historical product”.⁴⁶ From another perspective, Classical and Romantic elements are at war within society, but these terms themselves are redefined by Graves in *Poetic Unreason* to suggest the possibility of attaining a “new entity” in poetry that encompasses both. The idea that “the Romantic or emotional mode of thought has no place in civilised life”, is, he claims, a “false” one.⁴⁷ Instead, it should be “admitted by philosophers that though Romantic thought cannot be exactly foreseen, neither any more can intellectual thought”.⁴⁸ A defender of Romanticism, Graves attempts to anticipate and refute the possible relegation of his poetry by the “Platonists” to the

⁴⁵ *Collected Poems* 62.

⁴⁶ *The Common Asphodel* 284.

⁴⁷ *Poetic Unreason* 127.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 133.

uncivilised world of “the child or the savage”; a relegation which, he is aware, is generally bound up with “a political conflict between Order and Liberty”.⁴⁹ In what he calls the “reconstructive period”⁵⁰ following the War, Graves admits that his attitude became “increasingly historical”, and that he perceived “modern poets” as “writing behaviouristically according to the political camps into which they were divided”.⁵¹ He is perhaps writing *Poetic Unreason* with at least one eye on those political camps, especially the ones which might exert the greatest claim on him.

By 1949 his public stance has altered considerably:

for the last twenty-two years [I] have abandoned the view that the poet is a public servant ministering to the caprices of a world in perpetual flux. I now regard him as independent of fashion and public service, a servant only of the true Muse, committed on her behalf to continuous personal variations on a single pre-historic or post-historic poetic theme; and have thus ceased to feel the frantic strain of swimming against the stream of time.⁵²

It is the poet’s duty to “forget[s] what is the correct literary conduct demanded of him in relation to contemporary institutions” and to “write a poem which has the power of survival in spite of its disregarding these demands”.⁵³ He claims freedom from all spatial and temporal ties, except where they are essentials of the Muse herself. In such a context, the scepticism the war engendered can be ignored, and the notion of the adequacy or inadequacy of a poem’s response to events within history is effectively defunct. The criteria by which “national aesthetic canons” make value judgements are, it would appear, called into question. But Graves is not demanding a different court of appeal; rather he is invalidating any such judgements, regardless of the “national political sentiments” from which they arise, by virtue of the imaginative autonomy bestowed on him by his Muse.

It is at this point that one is in danger of accepting Graves’s criteria as sufficient explanation of and justification for his role as a poet, of accepting that “divine”

⁴⁹ Ibid. 126-27.

⁵⁰ Introduction, *The Common Asphodel* vii.

⁵¹ Ibid. ix.

⁵² Ibid. x.

⁵³ *The Common Asphodel* 141.

inspiration is autonomous and the poet's apparent freedom from the stream of time not a construct but a "gift". It is to credit Graves with an objectivity towards politics, history and what might be termed "geography" that he does not have; to accept "the White Goddess" in a way which one would not accept, nor would be required to accept, Yeats's "Vision". To set, as Graves does "fashion and public service" against a "pre-historic" or "post-historic" theme is to reduce engagement with history to nothing more than time-serving propaganda, and thus claim the ability to disengage. Both Graves and Yeats are highly eclectic, constructing belief-systems that will enable the poetry. But Yeats explicitly attempts to construct a tradition and define a taste by which he should be both judged and enjoyed; Graves treats the enabling of poetry as an arbitrary consequence of the system. The central figure of *A Vision* is Yeats himself; the whole system was revealed to him in order that he might have "metaphors for poetry".⁵⁴ In *The White Goddess*, the poet acts as servant of an objective reality not creator of a subjective system. Graves purports to project himself outside history, tradition, or moral judgement, under the guise not of escapism but of newly discovered "historical" truth. Where Yeats constructs, in *A Vision*, a "philosophy of history", Graves claims to write, in *The White Goddess*, an "historical grammar to the language of poetic myth", which is offered as a key to understanding his autonomy as poet outside (above) the constraints of history (in the "time-spirit" sense) and community. As one might expect, it is a key that proves somewhat elusive, the problem being as elusive as the key itself: "how to forge a pair of tongs with which to hold the red-hot metal while one is forging a pair of tongs".⁵⁵

The White Goddess is the culmination of a process which seeks to sanitise violence, to reassert the value of poetry in an ironic and largely unsympathetic age, to deal with conflict, and to resolve, or hold together, contrary thoughts. Graves's constant reorganisation of his Collected Poems - the exclusion of early work and the inclusion of, and emphasis on, most of the poetry written after a complex mythology has

⁵⁴ W.B. Yeats, *A Vision* 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1962) 8.

⁵⁵ Robert Graves, "To Derek Savage," 16 Dec. 1946, *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1946-1972*, ed. Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1984) 38.

evolved as an explanation of his verse - suggests that he, as much as, or even more than, Yeats, faces experiential problems that demand the appearance of resolution before poetry is possible. That he resorts, unlike Yeats, to a purely transcendental "solution" indicates a depth of conflict within the poet that must be in part attributable to his experience of war and his consequent neurasthenia.⁵⁶ In the post-war years, before evolving, or rather re-interpreting his mythology, Graves approaches the problems of society in terms of self rather than abstraction, not, like Yeats, transforming Ireland into a microcosm of the world, but becoming himself a microcosm of the greater wars waged in history, society, politics and literature. From this point of view, his early views on Romanticism and Classicism might be seen as preparing the way for use of mythology, more importantly Celtic mythology, without the nationalist connotations inevitably attendant upon Celticism at the time of the Irish Literary Revival (and after), and without being condemned by the English establishment as a frivolous member of that "profoundly irresponsible, and profoundly lovable race that fight like fiends, argue like children, reason like women",⁵⁷ which his parentage renders possible. Half-German, half-Irish, he represents division between Celt and Teuton united within the English tradition, and it is in these terms that the problem of the divided self is later transformed into a symbolic dialogue between the Muse and history. As Fussell puts it:

Being a "Graves"...is a way - perhaps the only way left - of rebelling against the positivistic pretensions of non-Celts and satirizing the preposterous scientism of the twentieth century. His enemies are always the same: solemnity, certainty, complacency, pomposity, cruelty. And it was the Great War that brought them to his attention.⁵⁸

Bergonzi describes Graves, in his early work, as "a quintessential Georgian", but one whose Irish background "separated him from the more conventional love of rural

⁵⁶ Miranda Seymour also argues, persuasively, that the death of Robert's son, David, in the Second World War, while serving with Graves's former regiment, the Royal Welch, evoked guilt and grief in Graves, and that the death "acted as a catalyst for his backward leap, into a world where the death of a heroic young man could be seen as a poetic sacrifice demanded by the Goddess". She notes that the Goddess's powers began to be extended from this time onwards, and that "the agenda for *The White Goddess* was already set" by late 1943. See *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London and New York: Doubleday, 1995) 305, 308-09.

⁵⁷ Rudyard Kipling quoted in Graves, *The Common Asphodel* 223.

⁵⁸ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) 206.

England of the other Georgians”, his “attachment to myth” a “constant element in his poetry”.⁵⁹ In a way, this is to take Graves’s explanations of self too literally. “Irishness” is not an innate quality, nor is “myth” specifically Irish. For Graves, a poet born and reared in England, it is the War which necessitates a revaluation of his “soul-landscape”, a process which his Irish descent complicates as much as it assists. What would be true to say, however, is that Graves seizes upon the “Celtic element”, as others have done before him, because it represents symbolic separation from the England he comes to know and not to love in the Great War. Ireland is conventionally a means of interrogating, perhaps reforming, but certainly contrasting English Imperialism. His precursor in this is Matthew Arnold, who, in his *Study of Celtic Literature*, takes the Celticism of Wales and Ireland as a possible means of overcoming the tendencies of Victorian England which he dislikes: The Celts, Arnold claims, are “inextricably bound up with us, and...we English...have...a thousand latent springs of possible sympathy with them”.⁶⁰ He seeks to cancel out what he perceives as the faults of English and Irish character by combining the best of both; to restrain the Celtic temperament and soften the English one. His ideal is the “fusion of all the inhabitants of these islands into one, homogeneous, English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between us”.⁶¹ That ideal is created by combining “the good of our German part, the good of our Latin part, the good of our Celtic part”.⁶² In 1927, Graves’s views are not dissimilar:

where the air and fire of the Gael, the sea and fire of the Norse, the earth and fire of the Saxons, can be reconciled in amity with other lesser contributions, that fifth essence or quintessence of poetry appears, which is variously known as the spirit of wonder, as genius, as divine inspiration.⁶³

Arnold’s Celt/Teuton theories have become, in the context of Irish politics, notorious. He is perceived as setting up a masculine/feminine, England/Ireland opposition which is then subverted by Irish nationalism in order to inspire loyalty to the (female) Irish nation

⁵⁹ *Heroes’ Twilight* 65.

⁶⁰ Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1903) xx.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 10.

⁶² *Ibid.* 145.

⁶³ Quoted in Daniel Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves and Muir* (New York: OUP, 1967) 135.

persecuted by the aggressive English (male). Deane suggests that Arnold provided Ireland (inadvertently perhaps) with a cultural myth, that his version of “killing Home Rule by kindness”, because it came too late, accidentally colluded in the Irish nationalist campaign and was responsible, in part, for its eventual sectarian character.⁶⁴ If Arnold’s theory was designed primarily to address the problems of England, Ireland functioning only as a means of illustrating those problems - “No service England can render the Celts by giving...a share in her many good qualities, can”, he writes, “surpass that which the Celts can at this moment render England, by communicating to us some of theirs”⁶⁵ - most interpretations have, for their own agendas, dragged him into a sphere he was not particularly concerned to address, that of Irish politics. Graves begins with an Arnoldian Celtic/Saxon fusion, for which he later substitutes his White Goddess: only in the Goddess is the quintessence of poetry found. But there is not necessarily any alteration in his views; like Arnold he is concerned to address both art and England. They are, however, recast in non-geographical, apolitical and impersonal terms in order to free him, unlike Arnold, from aesthetic or political canons.

“Ireland” functions in his aesthetic as the symbolic realm associated with eroticism, fear, the unknown, that which cannot be controlled, the romantic and the divine. What is remarkable, and for Graves, essential, is how little any of his perceptions of Ireland and “Irishness” relate to Ireland itself. He admits to being Irish (wholly or half as the context demands) only when it is advantageous to do so, in other words when admission takes on symbolic resonance in the all-encompassing mythology surrounding his poetry: in *Goodbye to All That*, his early erotic experiences, and the mingled terror and pleasure they evoke in him, are forerunners of the Goddess-love of his later years, and it is notable that these symbolic encounters, or “memories”, are associated with the Irish or “Irish” characteristics.⁶⁶ One might wonder, therefore, why Graves does not evoke the Irish connection more often and more explicitly. His view of the Anglo-Irish war gives a clue to the problem of inheritance. Graves, reading an ancient Irish poem,

⁶⁴ Seamus Deane, “Arnold, Burke and the Celts,” *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber, 1985) 17-27.

⁶⁵ Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* xii.

⁶⁶ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 1929. 2nd ed. 1957 (London: Penguin, 1960) 20-23, 39.

feels “an extreme conflict between the Gospel doctrine of forgiveness and the natural warlike spirit of the Irish”. The poem, he says:

had a particular appeal to me who am at one moment a sentimentalist of extreme republican sympathy and at another convinced by what amounts to a religious axiom that both sides in the Anglo-Irish quarrel have been equally in the wrong. My appreciation of the satire amounted to a recrudescence of the sentimental spirit more than usually repressed of late...⁶⁷

Irish Republicanism can be a “conscription of the spirit” in the way English patriotism was perceived in 1914. But Graves’s experience of war makes problematical any sentimental devotion to a political struggle. Freedom from history is the concern of many poets; for Graves, with the knowledge that land is bought with blood, it is freedom from geography that is of equal importance. Celticism, as it relates to Ireland, is highly politicised; the “romanticism” of the ancient legends which his father, Alfred Perceval Graves, celebrates in his introduction to *The Book of Irish Poetry*:

These sprays of Druid oak and yew,
And Red Branch rowans hoar with dew,
And sedges sighing from the strand
Whence Oiseen rode to Fairy Land

is intimately bound up with the Irish Literary Revival, and with romantic nationalism.⁶⁸ Hence, for Graves, the idea of Ireland is relevant, or those elements he chooses to emphasise from ancient Ireland, but only when it is divorced from the context of the “real” Ireland. (Celtic myth might be redemptive for Graves, but when he treads on his father’s Celtic Twilight ground, myths, as in “The Broken Girth”,⁶⁹ are subjected to a process of quirky historical analysis.) “Celtic” is, or seems to be for Graves, an appropriate substitute for “Ireland”, or equally interchangeable with “Wales”. In this context, his comment that “My father...broke the geographical connexion with Ireland, for which I cannot be too grateful to him”,⁷⁰ becomes less flippant and more

⁶⁷ *Poetic Unreason* 167.

⁶⁸ *The Book of Irish Poetry*, ed. Alfred Perceval Graves (Dublin: Talbot Press; London: T. Fisher Unwin, n.d.) xliii.

⁶⁹ *Collected Poems* 246.

⁷⁰ *Goodbye to All That* 15-16.

comprehensible. One might think that if England, with all its ideas, is to be so completely abandoned, Ireland could offer an alternative focus for loyalty. But geographical connection with Ireland might have stultified the growth of a complex and, for the poet, redemptive mythology. A “lost land” can lose its romantic appeal in the midst of civil war, and Kathleen ni Houlihan become, as AE described her, “a vituperative old hag”.⁷¹ Graves, sent to Ireland in 1918, paints a stereotypical picture - “a nearly naked girl-child, who sat down in the gutter and rummaged in a heap of refuse for filthy pieces of bread...a donkey, which began to bray” - and says “I had pictured Ireland exactly so, and felt its charm as dangerous”.⁷² Dangerous perhaps because it could demand of him involvement on a less than transcendental level, he avoids that involvement on the somewhat spurious grounds that “as an Irishman [he] did not care to be mixed up in Irish politics”.⁷³

Daniel Hoffman suggests that Graves, in the search for a tradition, “at first spurned these materials so close at hand”, his Celtic heritage, “because of his father’s professional identification with Irish letters”.⁷⁴ The father “motif” is, Edna Longley points out, immensely popular in contemporary Northern Irish writing. It “suggests one means of getting at the various configurations the past assumes in [the poet’s] imagination[s]”; it is “through parents that the individual locates himself or herself in history, and Irish history remains in many respects a family affair”.⁷⁵ The Graves family, on a more literal level, illustrates both these preoccupations, and the canonical chaos that can ensue. If there is little consensus about Graves’s “identification with Irish letters”, the same is true, though for different reasons, of his father, Alfred Perceval Graves.⁷⁶ And the post-First World War relationship between the two is indicative of

⁷¹ Quoted in F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939*, 1979 (Oxford: OUP, 1982) 108.

⁷² *Goodbye to All That* 229.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Barbarous Knowledge* 13.

⁷⁵ Edna Longley, “‘When Did You Last See Your Father?’ Perceptions of the Past in Northern Irish Writing 1965-1985,” *The Living Stream* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994) 152.

⁷⁶ John Montague appropriates Robert Graves as an Irish poet, but dismisses A.P. Graves as a “minor Victorian” revivalist (*The Faber Book of Irish Verse* 34). On the other hand, A.P. Graves, unlike Robert, is included in the *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, perhaps by virtue of being

Gravesian anxieties about the past and location of the self in relation to that past. *Goodbye to All That* and Alfred Perceval Graves's (unfortunately titled) *To Return to All That*⁷⁷ are, on one level, texts engaged in a family squabble (about historical accuracy and the depiction of various members of the Graves tribe) which is also a squabble about the impact of the Great War and "Irishness". A.P. Graves writes "there is much in his [Robert Graves's] autobiography that I do not accept as accurate. For the change in his outlook I hold the war and recent experiences responsible."⁷⁸ Having acknowledged this, he remains critical of those who "encourage youngsters to write off their lives at thirty-three".⁷⁹ In a way, this is symptomatic of the failure in understanding between generations that the war brought about. Where his father suggests a continuum, Robert Graves works on the assumption that the past, to borrow a phrase from another Great War survivor, is "a foreign country: they do things differently there".⁸⁰ Alfred Perceval Graves has other grumbles. He implies that Robert Graves evades proper acknowledgement of his Irish cultural inheritance,⁸¹ and complains that his own role in Robert's career goes unrecorded: "He gives me no credit for the interest I always felt and showed in his poetry. During the War I offered poems of his to editor after editor, and...arranged...for the publication of *Over the Brazier*."⁸² Graves, in other words, whatever the connotations of "Anglo-Irish" later in life, chooses not to

born and brought up in Ireland, (though, as the cases of Pearse, Montague and Paulin suggest, this has never been a criterion for Irish canonisation).

⁷⁷ (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930). A.P. Graves was, apparently, persuaded to this title because of the phenomenal success to Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* the year before. Since only a small part of A.P. Graves's autobiography deals with the subject of "Robert Graves", the title does less than justice to the contents of the book, or to A.P. Graves's own achievements, and leaves him apparently hanging on the coat tails of Robert Graves's fame.

⁷⁸ *To Return to All That* 318.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 343.

⁸⁰ See L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1953 (London: Penguin, 1958) 1. Graves adopts this principle literally: "I went abroad, resolved never to make England my home again; which explains the 'Goodbye to All That' of this title." *Goodbye to All That* 279. The same feeling is articulated even more explicitly by Vera Brittain in *Testament to Youth*, 1933 (London: Fontana, 1979): "Although I am still, comparatively speaking, a young woman, I feel, looking back upon the past, that it has been immeasurably long, for in the twenty years that have vanished since I left school, I have had - like many, I suspect, of my War generation contemporaries - two quite separate lives, two sets of circumstances and of personal relationships. Between the first life that ended with Edward's death in 1918, and the second that began with Winifred's companionship in 1920, no links remain". 495.

⁸¹ See *To Return to All That* 324.

⁸² *Ibid.* 333.

remember a poetic debut made under the auspices of a leading light of the Irish Literary Society. To deny the father is to deny a cultural tradition, a stable past, and to attempt to redefine the self as ahistorical and wandering free.

In an early poem, "The Poetic State", Graves resists the Irish past; in a way it is a poem which attempts denial of the Muse:

Poetry is, I said, my father's trade,
Familiar since my childhood; I have tried
Always to annul the curse of that grim triad

Which holds it death to mock and leave a poet
In mockery, death likewise to love a poet,
But death above all deaths to live a poet.

I will not see myself the desolate bard,
His natural friendships cast and his love buried,
Auguring doom like some black carrion bird.⁸³

The poem is later excluded from the *Collected Poems*: resistance to the ancient Irish triad implies resistance to the goddess, an emphasis on self (which is fallible) rather than devotion (with its connotations of infallibility):

But mocked, I see my weakness in that mocking,
And loved, I charge myself with that love-making,
Nor am I marked with beast's or angel's marking.⁸⁴

When the triad, "It is death to mock a poet, to love a poet, to be a poet" reappears some years later in *The White Goddess*, it has been "justified" and accepted in the context of his "historical grammar of poetic myth" and freed from the personal associations that inspire "The Poetic State".⁸⁵ He makes use, then, of the mythology popularised by the Irish Literary Revival, but does not follow a conventional Revivalist path. (In view of the fact that Alfred Perceval Graves comes under fire from Seamus Deane as one who, in his song-writing, aided a "sentimental and bowdlerizing process" in Ireland, it seems Graves was wise beyond his years not to get involved.⁸⁶) The poetic

⁸³ *Complete Poems* 274-75.

⁸⁴ *Complete Poems* 275.

⁸⁵ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) 450.

⁸⁶ Seamus Deane, "Popular Songs," *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, vol.2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991) 76.

landscape Graves constructs is beyond familial and temporal ties, and cannot be Ireland or England, in any realistic way, for that reason. Of the time spent in Wales in his childhood he writes:

Having no Welsh blood in us, we felt little temptation to learn Welsh, still less to pretend ourselves Welsh, but knew that country as a quite ungeographical region....Had this been Ireland, we should have self-consciously learned Irish and local legends; but we did not go to Ireland, except once when I was an infant in arms. Instead we came to know Wales more purely, as a place with a history too old for local legends; while walking there we made up our own....On our visits to Germany I had felt a sense of home in a natural human way, but above Harlech I found a personal peace independent of history or geography. The first poem I wrote as myself concerned those hills.⁸⁷

The inference, as regards Ireland, is fairly obvious: his Irish blood will demand collusion in a nation's history and culture; whereas to know a place "purely" is not to know it in any empirical sense at all. The self, as Graves constructs it, only comes into existence with the illusion of temporal and spatial independence. Wales is available to Graves as a kind of Ireland with the politics taken out. For MacNeice, it is a place where "Celtic myth and Roman leadmine spill", which seems, in consequence, "half way home, / One half of me approved and one half contraband".⁸⁸ For Graves, it is not freighted with any of the burdens that the concept of "home" brings with it. It is the landscape of "Lost Acres", where:

...we have no need
To plot these acres of the mind
With prehistoric fern and reed
And monsters such as heroes find.

Maybe they have their flowers, their birds,
Their trees behind the phantom fence,
But of a substance without words:
To walk there would be loss of sense.⁸⁹

Earlier than MacNeice, Graves sets up what can be conveniently termed an England/Ireland opposition, but unlike MacNeice (or, for that matter, Arnold), he

⁸⁷ *Goodbye to All That* 34-35.

⁸⁸ "Autumn Sequel", Canto V, *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1966) 350

⁸⁹ *Collected Poems* 77.

restates that opposition in transcendental terms: "None greater in the universe than the Triple Goddess!"⁹⁰ Celticism role-plays in an aesthetic based on conflict, but what Graves is denying Ireland (had he given it any thought) is the truth of Irish existence - its materialism, industrialisation, its fairly large-scale participation in the event, the war, which causes the division in Graves's psyche that the mythology is designed to heal. Perhaps there is no greater myth than the one which leads him to assert his Irish identity in 1970; that Ireland is one of the few countries left "where the name of poet is everywhere honoured".⁹¹

In some ways, considering his use and abuse of the Celtic element, it is surprising to find that Graves's closest poetic "descendants" are, like his ancestors, Irish. Graves's own problematical constructions of Ireland and Irishness may account for the fact that Mahon both denies him a place in the Irish tradition, yet, paradoxically, in claiming him as a poetic father-figure, also locates him within his own tribe. (Mahon responds in the same convoluted way to MacNeice in that his critical perceptions of MacNeice, inevitably perhaps, do not account for the effect of his own poetry in altering those perceptions.) Graves's influence on Irish poetry works in two contradictory ways: he appears, in contrast to Yeats, to offer imaginative freedom with no political or moral obligations as a possibility; the space for poetry does not, as it does with Yeats, appear to have been cleared only after enormous struggle with the "filthy modern tide". But in so far as his influence is limited, he simultaneously forces recognition that there is no such freedom: for Graves, as for anyone else, it is an illusory sense of liberty, one which is obtainable only at enormous cost. He negotiates his way through the tangle of Anglo-Irish literary and political relations without explicitly acknowledging that he is doing so. In this sense, the implications, possibly even deceptions, of his aesthetic have been more profoundly understood and recognised by his poet-descendants than by those who construct or deconstruct "national aesthetic canons of good and bad", and find Graves

⁹⁰ *The White Goddess* 492.

⁹¹ Robert Graves, "Address to the Poets," *Between Moon and Moon* 279.

relatively easy to ignore. (Mahon condemns those “who still dismiss him as an ivory-tower poet” as failing to understand “the implications of his work”).⁹²

The debt to Graves is, on one level, as it is for the Movement, stylistic. But Graves’s location of the self in relation to history, the way in which he has dealt with a violent past and asserted a poetic role, is also an influence. Graves is re-interpreted in Mahon’s and Heaney’s writings as a more effectively subversive figure than criticism of Graves’s poetry has generally acknowledged him to be. The “banished gods” in hiding in Mahon’s poetry from a desecrated world and waiting for the right time to re-assert their role owe something to Graves’s mythology, as does Heaney’s explication of violence as “a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and a goddess”.⁹³ While Mahon accepts that “the shadow of Yeats has to be there somewhere; it’s like being influenced by Shakespeare”, Graves is listed (along with MacNeice and Beckett) as a literary enthusiasm, one of the true poets Plato would have banished.⁹⁴ Michael Longley cites Graves (along with MacNeice) as a “still potent influence[s]”⁹⁵ and a “much-loved poet”;⁹⁶ for John Montague, Graves is “one of my heroes”.⁹⁷ Kavanagh pays him the dubious compliment, in his poem “Yeats”, of connecting Graves with Yeats and opening fire on them both.⁹⁸ The Gravesian inheritance, though, like the Yeatsian one, is not without its problems. Heaney relates goddess devotion directly to the “stream of time”, to “fashion and public service”, tangling himself up in the gendering of politics (and, consequently, the politics of gender). Mahon can never entirely lose the ironic sensibility that his experience of the twentieth century has engendered, however much

⁹² “Womanly Times,” Rev. of *Between Moon and Moon*, ed. Paul O’Prey, *Literary Review* 75 (September 1984): 8.

⁹³ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980) 57

⁹⁴ Interview by William Scammell, *Poetry Review*, 81:2 (1991): 5. Mahon’s juvenilia, some of which was published in the Trinity journal *Icarus* in the early 1960s, is highly indebted to Graves’s work, (and to that of the French symbolists).

⁹⁵ “The Longley Tapes,” interview by Robert Johnstone, *Honest Ulsterman* 78 (Summer 1985): 20.

⁹⁶ “Q & A with Michael Longley,” interview by Dillon Johnston, *Irish Literary Supplement* 5.2 (Fall 1986): 22.

⁹⁷ John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989) 54.

⁹⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Peter Kavanagh, 1972 (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1984) 348.

he might be driven by a similar impulse to articulate values propounded by Graves: a sense of the numinous in everyday life, a confident assertion of divine power.

One can see the extent and the limitations of Graves's influence in comparing his poems "An English Wood" and "Rocky Acres" with Mahon's "The Return", or MacNeice's "Woods". In "An English Wood":

...nothing is that harms,
No bulls with lungs of brass,
No toothed or spiny grass,
No tree whose clutching arms
Drink blood when travellers pass,
No mount of glass.
No bardic tongues unfold
Satires or charms.⁹⁹

Even if it is offered as a moment of "quietude", it is not the place of inspiration for "bardic tongues". This is similar to what MacNeice calls "this other, this English choice", which is less of a choice than it might appear because, he goes on to say, "in using the word tame my father was maybe right".¹⁰⁰ Graves's "[s]mall pathways" which "idly tend / Towards no certain end"¹⁰¹ find their echo in MacNeice's parody of English pastoral: "windows browed with thatch, / And cow pats - and inconsequent wild roses".¹⁰² The lines also owe something to, and mock, Rupert Brooke's "The Old Vicarage: Grantchester", with its "Unkempt...English unofficial rose".¹⁰³ So MacNeice is parodying, more specifically, a certain type of English pastoral, that associated with an insular, pre-war, patriotic idyll. Echoes of Graves and MacNeice also make up the elements of Mahon's "mild woods" in the "English" setting in which "The Return" opens. It is not "An English Wood" but a "wild land" which Graves chooses in "Rocky Acres":

This is a wild land, country of my choice,
With harsh craggy mountain, moor ample and bare.
Seldom in these acres is heard any voice

⁹⁹ *Poems 1914-1926* 20-21. *Complete Poems* 158

¹⁰⁰ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* 231.

¹⁰¹ *Poems 1914-1926* 21. Last line reads "Towards no fearful end" in *Complete Poems* 159.

¹⁰² *Collected Poems* 231.

¹⁰³ Rupert Brooke, *The Poetical Works*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber, 1970) 68.

But voice of cold water that runs here and there
Through rocks and lank heather growing without care.

...

Time has never journeyed to this lost land

...

Yet this is my country, beloved by me best,
The first land that rose from Chaos and the Flood,
Nursing no valleys for comfort or rest,
Trampled by no shod hooves, bought with no blood.¹⁰⁴

It is a landscape defined largely in terms of what it is not: it is not Christian, nor England, nor populated, nor does it exist within the confines of history, even geography. It also bears some resemblance to the landscape to which Mahon returns, but the point Mahon is making in "The Return" is that the geographical and emotional connection is not a matter of choice, and can never be severed, however much it might be challenged: the "last stubborn growth" has "nothing to recommend it / But its harsh tenacity".¹⁰⁵

Mahon, as with any other poet writing during the Northern Ireland "troubles", could not be described as a "war poet" in the restricted sense in which the term is often used. But if the basis for comparison is the work of Owen, Sassoon or Rosenberg, Graves himself is not a "war poet". What would perhaps be true to say is that Mahon is responding to the Great War in so far as his response to Northern Ireland in the 1970s is both indebted to Graves's trench experience and the aesthetic developed in consequence of that experience, and revises it in the context of a different war. Mahon evades the role of poet of the "troubles" in the same way that Graves rejects the harsh realism of the war poets: echoing Graves's 1918 judgement, Mahon suggests that Sassoon "was artistically naïve", as a consequence of which "his satirical war sketches, forceful as they were then, have dated badly".¹⁰⁶ Nor can he propose moments of pastoral to counter violence in the way Heaney finds possible in, for example, "The Harvest Bow". It is not a "solution" that works for Graves either. Bergonzi attributes this distance from English pastoral to his Irish background, but "Irishness" is not the common denominator in Graves and Mahon. What is common to both of them is the need for certainty, a value

¹⁰⁴ *Complete Poems* 83-84.

¹⁰⁵ Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: OUP, 1979) 99.

¹⁰⁶ Derek Mahon, "Break of Day in the Trenches," rev. of *Out of Battle*, by Jon Silkin, *Irish Times* 20 Feb. 1988: Weekend 9.



system, a faith that their own religious and geographical contexts cannot give to them in any organised or conventional form. Where they differ is in the degree to which the poet can be committed to any such value system. In Mahon's view, the trauma of the Great War prevented Graves from remaining "a Georgian nature poet with a touch of the Celt about him", urging him instead into the writing of "a modern poetry". But it is also a modern poetry "based on the conviction 'that society was once matriarchal'".¹⁰⁷ So Graves, with this conviction, sees irony, the "keynote to modernism" as "a passing historical phenomenon".¹⁰⁸ Fussell, on the other hand, suggests that "there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War".¹⁰⁹ If Graves has overcome irony, then, ironically enough, it is Mahon who, two generations later, suffers the profoundly ironic sensibility which is his inheritance from the Great War. Graves can at least assume belief in the goddess; Mahon cannot. The final irony is that if the impact of the War on modern society is such that "religious" certainty is an impossibility, it is Graves, the war-veteran, who has found a certainty, and Mahon, as inheritor of the post-war "modern age" who has lost it. As a result, when Graves is "thronged by angels" ("The Word"),¹¹⁰ Mahon tends to be surrounded by Milton's angels barring the way to Paradise with "dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms" ("Craigvara House").¹¹¹ Graves, Kirkham suggests, "took seriously the poet's duty to bring order into this intellectual and moral chaos" by affirming a "contrary reality", and reinstating the female principle, the neglect of which has brought such chaos on the world.¹¹² In Mahon's "Rage for Order", the poet's "talk of justice and his mother" is "the rhetorical device / of an etiolated emperor", which places him, like other potentially redemptive symbols, "gasp[ing] for light and life", and, as with Graves's Goddess, marginalised by history when the female principle is denied - "Nero if you

¹⁰⁷ Derek Mahon, "Uncle Robert," rev. of *The Assault Heroic*, by Richard Perceval Graves, *Irish Times* 20 Sept. 1986: 4.

¹⁰⁸ Introduction, *The Common Asphodel* ix.

¹⁰⁹ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 35.

¹¹⁰ *Collected Poems* 342.

¹¹¹ Derek Mahon, *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1991) 157.

¹¹² *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 270.

prefer, no mother there".¹¹³ Mahon, like Graves, seeks to reinstate the female principle, but he does so from a position which is felt to be considerably more embattled than Graves's. If one takes two love poems - Mahon's "Preface to a Love Poem",¹¹⁴ written in the 1960s, and Graves's "The Word" (which may have been written later than "Preface to a Love Poem")¹¹⁵ - one is written before and the other after the authors' first hand experiences of violence. The similarities are obvious. Both acknowledge the existence of an absolute value beyond language: Graves's "Word is unspoken" and Mahon's love poem remains unwritten; Graves's lovers "substitute a silence" and Mahon offers "a substitute / For final answers". But, ironically, the criticism that has been made of Mahon, that he "approaches reality 'at one remove'", using literariness as "a recurrent technique for putting a distance between the middle-class self and its panic",¹¹⁶ is one that, as Longley points out "fakes the evidence" by presenting Mahon's poem as being written with knowledge of a violent past and present.¹¹⁷ It is rather Graves who, writing with that knowledge, is "Driving two hearts improbably together / Against all faults of history" ("Timeless Meeting"),¹¹⁸ who can articulate what "the Word" finally "is": "simple affirmation, / The antonym of 'God'", and yet 'scapes whipping.

At this point, Graves's criticisms of Yeats begin to appear rather disingenuous. Yeats, Graves claims, "observing that his old poetical robes had worn rather shabby, recently acquired a new outfit. But confirmed literary habits are not so easily discarded: even when he writes of 'Lois Fuller's Chinese Dancers' - a high-brow Vaudeville turn - instead of Eire and the ancient ways...Such are the shifts to which poets are driven in trying to cope with civilisation and in rejecting or keeping up with the social

¹¹³ Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978* 44. The original version, in *Lives* (London: OUP, 1972) read "The rhetorical / Device of a Claudian emperor-" 22.

¹¹⁴ *Night-Crossing* (London: OUP, 1968) 13.

¹¹⁵ *Collected Poems* 342. This poem is tentatively dated as later than Mahon's on the grounds that it does not appear in Graves's 1965 *Collected Poems*.

¹¹⁶ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982) 189.

¹¹⁷ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 173.

¹¹⁸ *Collected Poems* 519.

requirements which seem to be laid upon poetry.”¹¹⁹ Richard Kearney suggests that Yeats “offered the myth of Mother Ireland as spiritual or symbolic compensation for the colonial calamities of historical reality”.¹²⁰ Graves’s problems with Yeats are twofold: first, Yeats can substitute for his Mother Ireland other symbols, which would indicate that his religious symbol of unity is in fact closer to a secular attempt at pluralism; and second, Yeats is involved in the “calamities of historical reality”, at best opposing rather than transcending them. Graves attributes to poetry “not moral goodness, the goodness of temporal action, but the goodness of thought, the loving exercise of the will in the pursuit of truth”.¹²¹ To adapt one’s thought to “historical emergencies”, then, is to compromise truth, and therein lies, allegedly, Yeats’s fault; to prefer “the violent expression of error to reasonable expression of truth”.¹²²

Richard Kearney writes that:

Keats once remarked that imagination is amoral and apolitical, transcending all considerations of good and evil. ‘The poetical character’, he wrote, has no ethical commitments and takes ‘as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen’. ‘What shocks the virtuous philosopher’, he concluded, ‘delights the chameleon Poet’. Keats was no doubt right - up to a point. And that point, I suggest, is often signalled when literary myth spills over into political myth. So that while a poet may be exempt from moral intentions - we all prefer poetry without propaganda - he or she can never be wholly exempt from moral consequences....*Mythos* can never be insulated from the ethical critique of *Logos*.¹²³

Graves refuses to compromise aesthetic principles in the face of historical emergencies: in this he stands, with Yeats, and in spite of his misreading of Yeats, as an example to a later generation of poets also confronted by such emergencies. But, going a step further than Yeats, he also denies or suppresses throughout his career the process of artifice and construction which has given him the illusion of freedom from place and from history. In “The Vow” he laments:

¹¹⁹ *The Common Asphodel* 136.

¹²⁰ Richard Kearney, *Myth and Motherland*, Field Day Pamphlet No. 5 (Derry: Field Day, 1984). Rpt. in *Ireland’s Field Day* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 70.

¹²¹ *The Common Asphodel* 283.

¹²² W.B. Yeats cited by Robert Graves, “To the *Observer*,” 5 Mar. 1960, *Between Moon and Moon* 195.

¹²³ *Myth and Motherland* 78.

....an uninstrutable world of men
Who dare not listen or watch, but challenge proof
That a leap of a thousand miles is nothing
And to walk invisibly needs no artifice.¹²⁴

Mythos, in *The White Goddess*, is presented under the guise of *logos*: the author is no more than an “historical” interpreter who puts the “facts” together in a narrative. In its own way, Yeats’s claim that *A Vision* was dictated to his wife by Spirits is no less deceptive, but while Yeats at one point took his system literally, his “reason”, he writes, “soon recovered”: the system “stands out clearly” as an imaginative one.¹²⁵ In “Sailing to Byzantium”, Yeats wishes for the “artifice of eternity”, and, in “The Fisherman”, turns to the imagination “[i]n scorn” of his audience.¹²⁶ Graves’s “The White Goddess” owes a debt to Yeats which suggests that his disapproval of the means by which Yeats maintains aesthetic freedom, and holds contrary thoughts in balance, does not necessarily devalue the end:

All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo’s golden mean-
In scorn of which we sailed to find her
In distant regions likeliest to hold her
Whom we desired above all things to know,
Sister of the mirage and the echo.¹²⁷

But Yeats’s acknowledgement of an “artifice of eternity” implies a self-consciousness about the poet’s “constructive” role that Graves refuses to acknowledge. “Byzantium” is a complex symbol for art itself; and though one might describe the White Goddess, or later the Black Goddess, as a “symbol of the power and mysteries of love”,¹²⁸ it is equally true that Graves accepts her, and projects her onto his audience as more than a symbol, as a deity who is unknowable and inexplicable. His response to her, as Kirkham points out, is, ultimately, presented as “religious”:¹²⁹

You live for her who alone loves you,

¹²⁴ *Collected Poems* 310.

¹²⁵ *A Vision* 25.

¹²⁶ W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950) 218, 167.

¹²⁷ *Collected Poems* 157.

¹²⁸ Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 202.

¹²⁹ *The Poetry of Robert Graves* 197-98.

Whose royal prerogative can be denied
By none observant of the awakening gasps
That greet her progress down whatever hall.¹³⁰

The Great War destroys any conventional notion of a system; and to give that horror “shape” in a conventional way would perhaps be to compromise the experience of it. The “religious” certainty which Graves constructs as a focus for poetry is, therefore, one which exists as a certainty for him only because the operation of “divine grace” is arbitrary in the extreme: “Exchange of love looks” can come “unsought / And inexpressible” (or presumably not come at all) to which the poet must “stand resigned”. Sassoon, in his verse letter to Graves in 1916, outlines a “survival plan”:

...I know
Dreams will triumph, though the dark
Scowls above me where I go.
You can hear me; you can mingle
Radiant folly with my jingle.
War’s a joke for me and you
While we know such dreams are true!¹³¹

It is one that Sassoon loses sight of, but Graves does not. For Graves there are certain emotional conflicts engendered by his experience of war which can never be rendered admissible to the poet’s aesthetic in terms other than those laid down by his White (or Black) Goddess, where pain is not eliminated, but in the act of “worship” the poet can “forget cruelty and past betrayal / Heedless of where the next bright bolt may fall”.¹³²

The lack of critical attention to Graves’s poetry in England and Ireland might suggest that his denials of artifice and his lamentations for “an uninstrutable world of men...” are made from an “untouchable” position. Graves, an influential figure for some contemporary Irish poets, and therefore, one might assume, a prime candidate for interrogation on the grounds of moral responsibility, has been largely ignored in recent years.¹³³ But Graves does not transcend the social and political reality of his time, he

¹³⁰ “The Vow,” *Collected Poems* 310.

¹³¹ “A Letter Home,” *The War Poems* 38.

¹³² “The White Goddess,” *Collected Poems* 157.

¹³³ Few critics mention Graves’s poetry in connection with studies of twentieth-century Irish poetry, (though there are exceptions to this - for example in the work of John Wilson Foster and Edna Longley).

only appears to transcend it, and his exclusion from critical debate points the inadequacy of the debate not the poet. This is not to historicize his aesthetic into nothing more than ideologically determined strategy. Rather it is to point out that leaving his work unchallenged, outside time and space, allows perpetuation of the connection he himself perceived between “national political sentiment” and “national aesthetic canons”. Donald Davie’s dismissal of Graves’s later career as irresponsible and apolitical is symptomatic of misreading based on an assumed connection between aesthetic value and explicitly political verse (Yeats’s “literature of the point of view”):

Graves, once the social historian of *The Long Week-End*, withdrew forty years ago to Majorca and has since found a retreat even more securely insulated from British social and political realities - the mythological Never-Never Lands ruled over by goddesses, white and black, where lately he seems to have been joined in mumbo-jumbo by Ted Hughes. Amis is too responsible to take that way out.¹³⁴

The only person insulating Graves from social and political realities here is Davie. “Mumbo-jumbo” hardly accords with Mahon’s more sensitive view of Graves’s later work as “traumatised” and “exorcising”.¹³⁵ Graves is neglected not because he is harmless, a love poet or muse-poet in his ivory tower, but because the opposite is true. That he has not been co-opted for various literary canons should not be read simply as rejection, but as a perfected resistance to them which their limitations allow. And because he is neither under fire nor without influence, one might draw the conclusion that his existence, as it was meant to, complicates and thereby to some extent invalidates the “national aesthetic canons” he went to some trouble to avoid.

¹³⁴ Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1973) 102.

¹³⁵ “Break of Day in the Trenches” 9.

Chapter 4



Louis MacNeice: Between Two Wars

"The war which broke us? Which war? Or which peace?"
-Louis MacNeice¹

I.

Samuel Hynes, in *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, outlines the ways in which the Great War has been remembered in English literature, and suggests that it is that kind of remembrance, consolidated in the late 1920s into what he calls a "Myth of the War", which informs attitudes towards the Great War in England up to the present day. The "Myth" has several elements which can be summarized as follows: innocent young men went to war for democracy and were slaughtered needlessly in battles planned by stupid generals; the soldiers' real enemies therefore became the "old men" at home, and as a result they rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, separating the younger generation from the past and from its cultural inheritance.² For the most part, in post-war literature which deals with the subject of the Great War, some or all of these principles of understanding the War are present. It is, in effect, a war remembered through the way in which it has been imagined. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, traces the peculiarly literary nature of the war through to the present: now even his own commentary on the

¹ "Autumn Sequel, Canto XIX" *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. E.R.Dodds (London: Faber, 1966) 409. All quotations are from this edition. Page numbers to this edition for quotations from the poetry in this chapter appear in parenthesis in the body of the text.

² *A War Imagined* (New York: Atheneum, 1991) xii. As George Orwell writes, "[b]y 1918 everyone under forty was in a bad temper with his elders....The dominance of 'old men' was held to be responsible for every evil known to humanity, and every accepted institution from Scott's novels to the House of Lords was derided merely because 'old men' were in favour of it." *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 1979) 121.

war has, as Geoff Dyer points out, become “part of the testimony it comments upon”.³ England, it might be said, has absorbed the Great War, or more accurately, what Hynes finds to be the “Myth of the War”, to the extent that writers now treat the subject imaginatively almost as if by right of experience. The effect of the Myth is one that will run and run: the break with the past can never be healed, the “old guard” can never be trusted again, and the old values hold no meaning for contemporary society.

Hynes reduces the “Myth of the War” to two propositions: “the old betray the young; the past is remote and useless”,⁴ and accepts these as informing principles behind the work of Modernist and thirties generation writers. If there is something which can be called a “Myth of the War” in Ulster, it bears little resemblance to this. It is, rather, the understanding of events which is to be found in Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. Its basic themes are: Ulster Protestants, unlike Catholics, rallied to the Imperial flag without hesitation, believing that to fight for the Empire was to fight for Ulster; they made a blood sacrifice on the Somme in protest against Home Rule; they were betrayed by the Empire, and thus by the Imperial principles they believed themselves to be fighting for. All those elements are in McGuinness’s play: they prompt the “No Surrender” attitude at its close, leaving that mentality as the final word and the ongoing position. (The play is not so much a commentary on that myth, but a first imaginative articulation of it.)

It is in some ways surprising to find that the “Myth of the War” in England can be so different from the myth in Ulster Protestant memory: the former perceives all pre-1914 values, not entirely accurately, as shattered; the latter reaffirms them without equivocation, because they *have* been shattered, and because the political situation demands, for reasons of internal security, that reaffirmation. Certain attitudes are characteristic of both places: the sense of betrayal, the mistrust of the British government. But if the myth in Ulster were to be reduced to two propositions, they would probably go something like this: the English betray the Loyalists; the past is

³ Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Penguin, 1995) 84.

⁴ *A War Imagined* xii.

present and consistently utilized.⁵ Hynes stresses the “irreversible pastness of the past”⁶ felt in English culture. Geoff Dyer, following on from this, sees that the war has led to a peculiar kind of preservation of the past, “as past”, simply because it has been destroyed.⁷ It is sealed off from the present in a way which makes it, as a rule, only a subject for nostalgia. In Ireland, on the other hand, what is stressed is the “irreversible presentness” of the past.⁸ As MacNeice points out in “Valediction”: “history never dies, / At any rate in Ireland” (52), a comment that can be relevant for both Loyalist and Republican memory, north or south of the border. Edna Longley writes that “Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants not only tend to remember different things, but remember them in different ways”.⁹ But for both, the issue is one of how past events validate present action, how a continuity can be found that justifies as well as inspires the present. The importance of the past lies in the way it provides parallels for the present, not, as in England, in the provision of a yardstick for measuring social and political change.

The Ulster myth of the war, as with the English one, is only part of the story, and remembrance in both Ireland and England is informed in part by social and political expediency. If in England the perceived break in history characteristic of Modernist writing is not a wholly accurate reading of the War - as Hynes points out, the old did not die in the First World War, they lived on into the post-war world and provided a continuity of sorts - in Ulster the emphasis placed on continuity, on an unbroken thread of Unionist history stretching back from the Somme to the Boyne, neglects the disruptions and discontinuities felt outside the purely political (propagandist) sphere. How the Great War is remembered has been the subject of many studies of English culture. In Ireland it has always been as much a question of whether one remembers it at all, or, in Ulster, whether a certain type of remembrance beyond a politically

⁵ The blood sacrifice of the Somme still demands the reward for which it was undertaken. The incantation of dates - 1690, 1912, 1916 and so on - validates, in unionist ideology, present action.

⁶ Quoted in Edna Longley, *The Living Stream* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994) 150.

⁷ *The Missing of the Somme* 5.

⁸ *The Living Stream* 150.

⁹ *The Living Stream* 69.

motivated stereotyping is even possible. What is apparent in all this is that for any post-war Irish writer who is also closely associated with the English literary tradition, there are at least two, probably three, different contexts to be negotiated in relation to the Great War.

MacNeice both exemplifies and revises aspects of war mythologies on either side of the Irish sea. The main perceptions of MacNeice's position in Irish and/or English literary canons in themselves echo differing cultural attitudes towards the First World War: it is either the most significant historical event in terms of cultural influence in the twentieth century, or it is unimportant in comparison with domestic events in Ireland at the same time, except as a kind of "meanwhile back at the ranch" context (a classic example might be Brendan Clifford's *Ireland in the Great War*, the subtitle and focus of which is *The Irish Insurrection of 1916 set in its Context of The World War*), or, finally, its complexity as a cultural influence in Ireland is properly revealed and understood only in a context where different attitudes and interests uniquely intersect. So MacNeice has generally appeared either on the margins of an English tradition, part of the "Auden Generation", but a minor poet in comparison with Auden, or has been rejected by the "Irish" tradition because of his Ulster, Church of Ireland background and English education, as a result of which he apparently fails to express in his poetry what Mahon (with irony) calls the "National Aspirations".¹⁰ Alternatively, and more recently, his reputation has, Mahon suggests, "come to rest" in the North of Ireland,¹¹ where he is the claimed or attributed ancestor of contemporary Northern Irish poets Longley, Mahon, Muldoon and Carson. In such a context, his failure to express fully either English national sentiments or Irish national aspirations (both of which tend towards sentimentality) becomes a creative strength and a political virtue.

II.

¹⁰ "MacNeice in England and Ireland," *Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 117.

¹¹ Introduction, *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Derek Mahon (London: Sphere Books, 1972) 14.

In some ways, Samuel Hynes towers over the thirties generation as does Paul Fussell over the Great War. He does so not only because of *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, but also because, in *A War Imagined*, he has consolidated the ground rules for understanding the thirties in relation to Edwardianism and the Great War. A fascination running through *The Auden Generation* is the long term effect of the First World War, and although it was written first, the subtext of that book forms the basis for his later study of the Great War in English culture: the First World War, he claims, “dominated the lives of those who were children then as much as it did the lives of their elders”.¹²

In both studies, his observations regarding the effect of the Great War on English culture are subtle, perhaps even definitive. But Hynes passes judgement on Yeats, MacNeice, Stephen MacKenna, Bernard Shaw and others, as if such observations are equally appropriate to Ireland. One might not wish to draw the lines as decisively as Yeats, who writes that Irish poetry “moves in a different direction and belongs to a different story”,¹³ since certain historical events have relevance for both countries and literary influences arising from them are not exclusive to either. But without an understanding of the fact that for any Irish writer, however “Anglicized” he or she might seem, English cultural history is always qualified by the experience of Ireland, inclusion of a writer such as MacNeice in an exploration of “literature and politics in England” will inevitably find him in some respects to be disruptive and unhelpful in relation to the main theme.

In the final chapters of *A War Imagined* and the opening of *The Auden Generation*, Hynes illustrates how the First World War was “the peculiar shaping force” of the thirties generation, the event which at least partially gave the thirties poets a sense of being a “generation”, as it had also previously defined the war poets as a distinct group. For the thirties generation, Hynes writes, “awareness of the world and awareness of the war came at the same time”. In that world they were “isolated...like

¹² Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London: Bodley Head, 1976) 17.

¹³ W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 506.

the survivors of some primal disaster, cut off from the traditional supports of the past".¹⁴ The feelings of the next generation towards the war, Hynes describes as "deeply ambivalent", encompassing "revulsion at the brutality and waste of it", guilt at not having fought, and envy of those who had. Isherwood, Orwell, and Philip Toynbee all articulate those feelings. Isherwood wrote that the "young writers of the middle 'twenties were all suffering, more or less subconsciously, from a feeling of shame that we hadn't been old enough to take part in the European war". For Orwell, the "idea 'War'" arouses "a complex of terrors and longings". Toynbee, as a boy, "remember[s] murmuring the name '*Passchendaele*' in an ecstasy of excitement and regret".¹⁵ "My particular generation", Orwell writes, "became conscious of the vastness of the experience they had missed. You felt yourself a little less than a man, because you had missed it."¹⁶

A theme, or problem, recurrent in writing of the inter-war years is how, in Auden's phrase, to "Make action urgent and its nature clear".¹⁷ Inevitably, the end of the Great War and of conscription took away from the age-old problem of one's responsibility as artist and man the overriding imperatives of a state of emergency. The soldier poets, who appeared to have known how to act and had acted, were envied (and admired) for the possession of moral and artistic certainties that arose, paradoxically, out of the very event that destroyed such certainties for future generations. For Stephen Spender, in the 1920s "Shadow of War", the question is "What can I do that matters?",¹⁸ a line that actually carries more than one question - in other words "what can *I* do", in comparison perhaps with what *they* did, or what actually *matters* in a world where it is felt that no value systems have been carried over from the pre-war society. The years 1914-18 are a watershed: the world before the war is a mystery, the

¹⁴ *The Auden Generation* 17, 20.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hynes, *The Auden Generation* 21.

¹⁶ George Orwell, "My Country Right or Left," *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol.1 (London: Penguin, 1970) 589.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hynes, *The Auden Generation* 12.

¹⁸ Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems 1928-1985* (London: Faber, 1985) 34. The poem was written in the 1920s and included in *Poems* (London: Faber, 1933) as "Who live under the shadow of a war".

fascination with the past a fascination with something that, because it has so completely disappeared and no longer gives any clues as to how one might expect the future to be, cannot be understood.

MacNeice's responses to the Great War while they do have something in common with those of his English friends, are sufficiently complicated by his nationality to make him an uneasy bedfellow of Auden, Spender, Day Lewis etc., if they are to be considered as a generation defined by the English post-war world in which they come to maturity. Hynes's comments do not claim to extend outside England, but they do, at times, claim to include MacNeice. The actual inclusion of MacNeice in such a book is not in question, since his work is not separable from English literary or political history in the 1930s. But it should be remembered that it is neither safely nor unequivocally ensconced within it. Obliquely, if never openly, recognising this, Hynes attempts to have his cake and eat it, on the one hand to praise MacNeice as an English poet when, in *Modern Poetry* and *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice offers definitive studies of a generation from within, and on the other to attribute those characteristics of MacNeice's poetry that distinguish him from his contemporaries - his "melancholy", his apparently "apolitical" position during the thirties¹⁹ - to the fact that he is Irish, without simultaneously acknowledging that the criteria by which he is to be judged must necessarily change also.

The tendency to judge Irish poetry by reference to English history is implicit in *A War Imagined*. Few of the "great Edwardians", Hynes claims, found "an adequate wartime voice" in the Great War, in evidence of which he cites the literary silences of Arnold Bennett, Bridges, Kipling and Galsworthy, but also that of Yeats, who published no poems in 1916.²⁰ By implication, Yeats should have responded to the profoundly felt change which 1916, with the Somme, the introduction of conscription, and the growing recognition of the horrors of trench warfare, brought about in English society. But Yeats, of course, did respond to 1916 in writing about the Easter Rising, although he

¹⁹ *The Auden Generation* 295.

²⁰ *A War Imagined* 103.

delayed publication of those poems for some time (the audience not the voice being inadequate). And "The Second Coming", written in January 1919, finds its voice and vision in the traumatic upheaval of the war years. As MacNeice points out, "[t]here have been many such poems since the Great War". But, significantly, "Yeats differs from the others in that he implies that even the coming anarchy has its place in a pattern".²¹ The vision is tragic but heroic, in contrast to the pointless "sheer dissolution"²² of *The Waste Land*. Only if the context is Anglocentric, if he is expected to respond with certain modes of thinking characteristic of 1920s England, does Yeats appear to be silent. The same problem reappears in relation to Yeats and Owen. Hynes writes:

Nearly two decades after the war had ended, W.B. Yeats refused to include poems by Owen in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* because, he said, 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'. Historically speaking, he was wrong of course; the First World War had changed all that....Once the soldier was seen as a victim, the idea of a hero became unimaginable: there would be no more heroic actions in the art of this war.²³

There are two fallacies here, first, and particularly prevalent in the response to Yeats's comments, is the view that Yeats's evaluation of Owen's poetry as passive suffering is sound even though his judgement of the aesthetic principle behind it is misguided - Hynes like others defends Owen from Yeats according to Yeats's reading of Owen's poetry. Second, and more important, is the assumption hovering behind these lines that any aesthetic can be somehow proved or disproved in terms of its relation to an abstract idea of English history. For Owen, certainly, there can be no more heroic action as it had been commonly understood, but in Yeats's war poetry of the early 1920s there can, not from any ignorance of history, but from a different perspective on it.

Although MacNeice's reaction to the Great War is not Yeats's, it is equally instructive to note that difference in perspective which separates him from his English contemporaries. In *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* he writes:

²¹ *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 1941, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1967) 119. Hereafter abbreviated in this chapter as *PWBY*.

²² *PWBY* 120.

²³ *A War Imagined* 215.

Even now many Englishmen are unaware of the Irishman's contempt for England. Although brought up in the Unionist North, I found myself saturated in the belief that the English are an inferior race. Soft, heavy, gullible, and without any sense of humour. They had an ugly way of speaking and they had covered the world with machines. They were extraordinarily slow in the uptake. In my eyes they were so much foreigners that when the Great War broke out in 1914 (I was then nearly seven) it was some time before I could make out whether it was the English or the Germans who were the enemy.

Yeats was always conscious that the English were foreigners or, to put the emphasis more correctly, that he was a foreigner among the English.²⁴

He is using here his own position to illustrate that of Yeats: the corrective that the comments are intended to make regarding Yeats are also, one would infer, meant to make a similar point about MacNeice. Even the “‘dour’ Ulsterman and the free-and-easy Southerner (both epithets need qualification) have much more in common with each other”, he suggests, “than either has with the Englishman”.²⁵ There is nothing in MacNeice's critical writings to suggest a feeling of guilt because he “missed out” on the war, probably for the simple reasons that, first, unlike his English contemporaries, he would not have been under any legal obligation to go and fight even had he been born a few years earlier, and second, as someone who always gave qualified support to the cause of Irish independence from Britain, the cultural pressures that work on the post-war generation in England would not necessarily work on a Northern Protestant Irishman. The ideals of those Englishmen who enlisted are themselves part of the “Myth of the War”; it is worth comparing them with the view of a writer from Ulster who, because his work does not help to consolidate the war myths that appeared in England or Ulster receives little attention in cultural studies of the First World War. C.S. Lewis writes of the Great War:

I was compelled to make a decision which the law had taken out of the hands of English boys my age; for in Ireland we had no conscription. I did not much plume myself even then for deciding to serve, but I did feel that the decision absolved me from taking any further notice of the war....I put the war on one side to a degree which some people will think shameful and some incredible.²⁶

²⁴ *PWBY* 52.

²⁵ *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 214.

²⁶ *Surprised by Joy*, 1955 (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977) 128.

The above passage is preceded by a lyrical description of his home in the North of Ireland, a place which is seen as a world apart: "a different world...the thing itself, utterly irresistible, the way to the world's end, the land of longing...". Concessions are made in this section of his autobiography to a dual inheritance: to England in the decision to serve, and to his Ulster background in the reluctance to submerge himself in the English patriotic fervour of the war years.

MacNeice is often approached as a poet who causes a problem for the Irish tradition (as will be explored later) in terms of how or whether it can accommodate him. But equally dangerous is the English view of the Irish, beyond simple neglect, particularly in the xenophobic atmosphere of the war and immediate post-war years, a view which might lead any Irishman in England to dissociate himself from Irish stereotypes. Hynes traces in popular fiction of the 1920s a tendency to defend an idealized England, quoting among other examples John Buchan's 1924 novel, *The Three Hostages*:

The moral imbecile...had been more or less a sport before the war; now he was a terribly common product, and throve in batches and battalions. Cruel, humourless, hard, utterly wanting in sense of proportion, but often full of perverted poetry and drunk with rhetoric - a hideous, untamable breed had been engendered. You found it...very notably among the sullen murderous hobbledehoys in Ireland.²⁷

Ironically, in describing MacNeice, in *The Auden Generation*, as a "professional lachrymose Irishman",²⁸ Hynes falls into a stereotyping as unhelpful as the very stereotyping of Ireland and Irishmen he picks up on in *A War Imagined*. And MacNeice himself evades the whole truth somewhat when he writes that "Many English people cannot see [Ireland] clearly because she gives them a tear in the eye".²⁹ Contempt, hatred, even fear, were also apparent in England in the post-war years: the Great War is succeeded, after all, by a war between England and Ireland. A conflict of interests and a self-preservatory role-playing are evident in MacNeice's first years in England: he plays

²⁷ Quoted in Hynes, *A War Imagined* 357.

²⁸ *The Auden Generation* 334.

²⁹ *PWBY* 46.

the Irish buffoon to gain popularity, describes Carson as “a pity” out of loyalty to his father and Home Rule, but feels instantly disloyal to a Unionist, burns an effigy of the Kaiser in a spirit of patriotic fervour on Armistice Day but knows it to be a cheap gesture, and, in a well-known passage in his autobiography, reveals the contradictory pull on his loyalties of two attitudes neither of which can be reasonably said to fully reflect his own opinions:

On the Twelfth of July Powys came into my dormitory and said: ‘What is all this they do in your country today? Isn’t it all mumbo-jumbo?’ Remembering my father and Home Rule...I said Yes it was. And I felt uplifted. To be speaking man to man to Powys and giving the lie to the Red Hand of Ulster was power, was freedom, meant I was nearly grown up. King William is dead and his white horse with him...But Powys went out of the dormitory and Mr. Cameron came in, his underlip jutting and his eyes enraged. ‘What were you saying to Mr. Powys?’ Oh this division of allegiance! That the Twelfth of July was mumbo-jumbo was true, and my father thought so too, but the moment Mr. Cameron appeared I felt rather guilty and cheap. Because I had been showing off to Powys and because Mr. Cameron being after all Irish I felt I had betrayed him.³⁰

While the demands made on loyalty by the Red Hand of Ulster should not be underestimated, neither should the demands for conformity made by an England that was at that time particularly intolerant and insular. Not surprisingly, the confusion of MacNeice’s childhood develops into a resistance to all failed or failing historical myths: “I will not give you any idol or idea, creed or king” (“Train to Dublin”, 28). No identity myths are absolute: if they are projected as such they play personal experience false.³¹

In “Carrickfergus”, MacNeice explores his relations to Ulster, England, and, through them, the Great War. The social and historical location of the poem epitomises a felt disunity that continues into the poet’s adult life and leads him to eschew any simple loyalties. As with other thirties poets, awareness of the world and the war come

³⁰ Louis MacNeice, *The Strings Are False* (London: Faber, 1965) 78-79.

³¹ Jennifer Johnston’s *How Many Miles to Babylon*, 1974 (London: Penguin, 1988) comprehensively explores this problem, tracing the careers of two Irish soldiers - a peasant-class Catholic and an Ascendancy Protestant, in the British Army on the Western Front. On a personal level they are friends; in the climate of the time, the expectations imposed by the labels attached to them preclude a relationship in public, either in Ireland or France. The novel opens with the phrase “Because I am an officer and a gentleman...”, a phrase which automatically conjures up expectations of a type, and also closes with it, by which time it is a commonplace that has become bitterly ironic.

together, but MacNeice is growing into an awareness of a very different culture, and suggests that the experience of England restricts rather than encourages that growth. Michael Roberts wrote in the 1930s that “we can no more forget the world of politics than the soldier-poets could forget the wounded and the dead”.³² Explicitly, the dilemmas facing 1930s writers are linked to the First World War poets; it is a way of suggesting that the next generation did not, after all, miss out on the “war”. For the 1930s generation, the Communist Party was, Orwell suggests, “simply something to believe in...a church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline”.³³ Though a different context applies, theoretically at least one could feel action to be urgent and its nature clear.

When Hynes calls MacNeice “at best a reluctantly political man”,³⁴ or, more usually, “apolitical with a good heart”,³⁵ he is narrowing the scope of “politics”, and assuming that the kind of commitment which was “urgent” and “clear” to some of MacNeice’s contemporaries was the only kind of political stance available. Those comments also suggest that the question of political involvement, in other words involvement with everyday politics, can be raised to a moral issue. Roberts certainly validates it in those terms by emotive reference to the experience of a previous generation, and unless that frame of reference is accepted, one might wonder why the fact that MacNeice is “apolitical” necessitates a defence of his moral character (“with a good heart”). Mahon straightens out various misconceptions about MacNeice by pointing out that his writing is “*profoundly* superficial”, that “the surface *was* the core”;³⁶ in the same way, one might say that he is profoundly political. In Ireland, Edna Longley points out, “politics begin with the family and not at voting age”.³⁷ If, as Orwell said, many “middle class” 1930s writers “too young to have effective memories of the Great War...can swallow totalitarianism *because* they have no experience of anything except liberalism”,³⁸ this does not hold true for MacNeice with a background

³² Quoted in Hynes, *The Auden Generation* 161.

³³ “Inside the Whale,” *The Collected Essays, Journalism and letters of George Orwell*, vol.1, 565.

³⁴ *The Auden Generation* 299.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 295.

³⁶ “MacNeice in England and Ireland” 115.

³⁷ Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 17.

³⁸ “Inside the Whale” 565.

where political disputes, antagonisms, and mutually exclusive political claims force themselves on consciousness fairly early. “[I]f the time allowed”, Hynes writes, “[MacNeice] would have been content to go on as he was, a charming Irish classicist with upper-class tastes and a gift for making melancholy poems”.³⁹ But he thereby ignores the way in which the public sphere, from the very beginning of his career, interweaves with MacNeice’s personal experience, suggesting MacNeice would have been happier if he could have continued without a sense of impending crisis and doom when in point of fact he had never been without that sense: “When I was five the black dreams came; / Nothing after was quite the same” (“Autobiography”, 183). Melancholia is neither a harmless aesthetic tool nor a soulful evasion of the real world.

“Carrickfergus” (69-70) exemplifies the complexity (rather than the charm and melancholy) of MacNeice’s position, dealing simultaneously with private and what might be called collective memories, each of which imposes different responsibilities on the poet. It is a “collective” memory which dominates the first four stanzas of the poem. Past invasions are responsible for the divisions and inequalities of the present: “The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses / But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and halt”. Guilt runs through the poem: the “Norman walled this town against the country / To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave”, an attitude which contrasts sharply with the sensory alertness of the poem’s speaker. But the difference in attitude does not, he recognises, necessarily narrow the distance between “invader” and “slave”. MacNeice is still “born to the anglican order, / Banned forever from the candles of the Irish poor”, and the move to England in the “camouflaged” steamer at the end of the poem puts the blinkers on him, although against his will, as surely as the Norman once voluntarily “Stopped his ears”.

From the sixth stanza through to the end of the poem, the Great War emerges as the dominating feature: “The war came and a huge camp of soldiers / Grew from the ground in sight of our house...”. The tone and perspective of the verse is kept for the most part on a kind of nursery footing: the child who observes has the dominant voice

³⁹ *The Auden Generation* 370.

rather than the adult who interprets. The result, in “Marching at ease and singing ‘Who Killed Cock Robin?’ / The troops went out by the lodge and off to the Front”, is that the lines are overlaid with an ironic awareness all the more potent because the irony lies in what was outside the child’s perspective, in what has been left out of the story. The child might remember “Who Killed Cock Robin?”, popular as a nursery rhyme, but what stands out in that stanza is simply “Killed”; and the troops singing it are marching to the Front, in all innocence one assumes, to die. Syntactically, the poem begins to run away with itself when he envisages the war, in the tone and with the concerns of a child, lasting forever:

I thought that the war would last for ever and sugar
Be always rationed and that never again

Would the weekly papers not have photos of sandbags
And my governess not make bandages from moss
And people not have maps above the fireplace
With flags on pins moving across and across- (69-70)

As with other things, the war impacts on MacNeice in the public and the private sphere. The years 1914-18 are crucial formative years for him: the death of his mother, the Ulster crisis, the move to England, are all encompassed in the sense of loss that pervades “Carrickfergus”, and find expression in the images he retains from the Great War and from the conflicts of the past in Ireland. The way in which MacNeice identifies with the war cannot be separated from the way he identifies with England and Ireland. And it is the Great War which reaches into a never ending future in the child’s imagination, as do the problems of identifying completely with either country, in a perfect expression of movement and stasis combined. The line “moving across and across” stylistically imitates attitudes characteristic of the war - that despite constant activity, in real terms in a war of attrition no movement was taking place - with a line end that neither ends nor goes anywhere. In the final stanza of the poem, the poet finds himself relocated in a context which, while it suggests unity, simplicity, and an escape from the dark, potentially violent world of Ulster, also dulls the sensory alertness that informed his understanding of past and grasp of the realities present:

I went to school in Dorset, the world of parents
Contracted into a puppet world of sons
Far from the mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt-mines
And the soldiers with their guns. (70)

Moving to England is in some way a diminishment, a “puppet world”, and not simply because of the generation change. By implication, things are simpler in England: it is Ireland that brings the war into focus for the poet, or rather brings the past into focus in relation to the present war. In a sense, of course, there could be no escape from the war in an English public school at that time, but the cultural pressures of wartime England, while they might have been greater, did not allow for the disunity that gives “Carrickfergus” its energy as a poem.

III.

Even as it serves to illustrate MacNeice’s difference from his English contemporaries, “Carrickfergus” also contains the elements which lead to his marginalisation in the “Irish” tradition. One might say that MacNeice himself has unwittingly provided the ammunition for the ranged guns of Irish Irelanders, defending an indigenous Irish canonical purity, and Ulster regionalists, extolling the virtues of the “rooted” man. Prone to a humility and regret inconceivable in Yeats, for example, MacNeice appears to outlaw himself from Irish Ireland (“Banned forever...”) almost before anyone else has the chance to do it for him. His memories of Ireland in “Carrickfergus” are not its National Aspirations, but its Imperial war involvement, the Norman conquest, its industrial north, in other words, the “Anglican” order of things. It is one thing to have this background; it is quite another to find acceptance within a certain tradition of Irish poetry if one does not seek redemption from it (in the style of George Russell) by at least aspiring to express Irish National Aspirations, which include, Mahon suggests, “patriotic graft and pious baloney”, and without the inclusion of which one cannot really write Irish poetry. MacNeice’s view of “Official Ireland”, was, however, as Mahon

points out, increasingly “one of positive distaste, which is alright coming from Austin Clarke but bad manners from a Northern Protestant”.⁴⁰

In 1931, Daniel Corkery published the polemical and nationalist study *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, in which he claimed that “the three forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being, are (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) The Land”.⁴¹ MacNeice, by this token, is not an Irish being. In addition, Corkery’s view of England and Ireland in the Great War, while it had its precursors in the 1916 insurrectionaries, and still has its descendants among northern nationalists, excludes aspects of Ulster’s history as much as it elides the question of Irish involvement in the war:

Not Ireland itself, under its alien ascendancy, has been more war-ravaged than parts of Europe: indeed there is hardly a spot of European ground that has not in this regard more resemblance to Ireland than to England - England fattening and refattening its haunts of ancient peace, century after century, while its soldiers campaigned abroad. We recollect that in the early stages of the Great War a writer in an English review mentioned how struck he was with the resemblance he noted between the small towns and villages of Poland and those of Ireland: he did not, however, bethink himself of the untoward circumstances that had brought the similarity about.⁴²

“Irishness”, John Wilson Foster suggests, “in certain contexts is an honorific title, and as such open for claim, for bestowal (and rejection), and possibly for negotiation”. The problem with Corkery’s definition was that it linked Catholicism to the already existing Revivalist criteria for Irishness, restricted the possibility of negotiation, and, for a while at least, proved to be “the winning definition”.⁴³

MacNeice’s view of history is not Anglo-centric, but neither is it “Corkerian”, and in the Ireland of the 1930s, his status as an Irish writer was negligible. To some extent, Yeats’s national broadcast on “Modern Poetry” in 1936 confirms, if not

⁴⁰ “MacNeice in England and Ireland” 117.

⁴¹ Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, 1931 (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1966) 19.

⁴² *Ibid.* 37.

⁴³ John Wilson Foster, “Who are the Irish?,” *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991) 248, 254.

intentionally, MacNeice's exclusion from what Mahon calls the "charmed circle, known and feared the world over, of Irish poets".⁴⁴ Yeats writes:

It was in Eliot that certain revolutionary War poets, young men who felt they had been dragged away from their studies, from their pleasant life, by the blundering frenzy of old men, found the greater part of their style...[T]heir social passion, their sense of tragedy, their modernity, have passed into young influential poets of today: Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Day Lewis, and others.⁴⁵

In some respects this is the familiar war myth again, but the real point of his remarks - that of the influence of the war poets, is a valid one: MacNeice, unlike Yeats, does see Owen, along with Eliot, Graves and Lawrence, as one of the "finest poets in England".⁴⁶ Yeats does not explicitly handcuff "social passion" here to Communism and open fire on them both (even if he might like to) and so does not on those grounds misjudge MacNeice. Where he does the younger poet a disservice is in implying that the effect of the Great War radically altered the writing of the post-war generation in England including MacNeice, but left Irish poetry untainted:

The English movement, checked by the realism of Eliot, the social passion of the War poets, gave way to an impersonal philosophical poetry. Because Ireland has a still living folk tradition, her poets cannot get it out of their heads that they themselves, good-tempered or bad-tempered, tall or short, will be remembered by the common people.⁴⁷

In evidence, Yeats proceeds to quote St John Gogarty's work as "among the greatest lyric poetry of our time".⁴⁸

The position MacNeice seems obliged to defend here is, rather bizarrely, that he is both Irish and influenced by the changes wrought by the First World War. (Or, to put it another way, that English and Irish literary traditions are not mutually exclusive but intimately and productively related.) The apparent incompatibility of those two things reveals more about the Great War and Irish memory than it could ever reveal about MacNeice. In a broadcast debate between F.R. Higgins and MacNeice in 1939 on the

⁴⁴ "MacNeice in England and Ireland" 117.

⁴⁵ *Essays and Introductions* 499-500.

⁴⁶ *PWBY* 178.

⁴⁷ *Essays and Introductions* 506.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 507.

subject of modern poetry, the arguments of Yeats's "Modern Poetry" broadcast are rehearsed (this time with an opposition). Higgins, like Yeats, claims that when one considers "the spirit informing poetry written in English since the European War" and "the inner features most evident in the poetry of today", one finds that "the abundance of such verse is, of course, written in England". "[P]ure poetry", he goes on to say, "comes from Ireland". For MacNeice, his own experience of history negates such an argument: it is, he says, an "impure age, so it follows that much of its poetry, if it is honest...must be impure".⁴⁹ He is, implicitly, being accused by Higgins in the debate of trying to escape from his own Irishness; but what he is defending is an understanding of an impure age dependent in part on that Irishness. One wonders at times if MacNeice is to be criticized more by the Irish for not being Irish, or for being Irish but without due appreciation of the spiritual gifts with which he is thus endowed.

While such views on Irish poetry, current in the 1930s, have been substantially revised in the last thirty years, the still occasionally evident reluctance on both sides of the border to address the issue of how far the First World War impinged on Irish as well as English poetic practice puts MacNeice in the position of pathfinder between traditions, and, for those seeking canonical stability, permanent problem (witness Higgins's chaotically argued attack which has little to do with modern poetry and everything to do with persuading MacNeice to come into the fold). The easiest label to attach to MacNeice is always "exile": his differences are thereby accounted for and condoned. It is also the label he was inclined at times to attach to himself. One might think, in fact, that having said goodbye to his country so often - "Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum" ("Valediction", 53); "From all which I am an exile" ("Eclogue from Iceland", 41); "she will not / Have me alive or dead" ("Dublin", 163) - there is little need for anyone else to speed his departure. But MacNeice's tendency in a poem, if he closes a door, is to leave a window open somewhere. He is exiling himself from a *type* of Irishness rather than the country itself, claiming instead a multiplicity of cultural

⁴⁹ Quoted in the Prologue to *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Paul Muldoon (London: Faber, 1986) 17.

influences: England, the West of Ireland, the North of Ireland, as in "Carrick Revisited":

Torn before birth from where my fathers dwelt,
Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,
Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England
Cancels this interlude; what chance misspelt
May never now be righted by my choice. (225)

The refusal, the inability rather, to invalidate any part of his experience means that the act of rejection is always compromised by the possessive pronoun: "Ireland, my Ireland", "Farewell my country": it also in part accounts for the proliferation of oxymorons, parentheses and central caesuras in his poetry explored by Terence Brown.⁵⁰ A "duality of cultural reference" does not necessitate reconciliation, only acceptance of diversity. When MacNeice describes himself in "Western Landscape" as "neither Brandon / Free of all roots nor yet a rooted peasant", but still claims his right to "add one stone to the indifferent cairn" (257), he is undermining De Valera's Ireland of rural peasants and John Hewitt's dictum, written in the same year as "Western Landscape", that the Ulster writer "must be a *rooted* man".⁵¹ If, as suggested previously, the experience of Ireland qualifies that of England, the same principle applies the other way around. The First World War, for example, permeates MacNeice's imagination as does the dream of the "Land of the Ever Young"; and neither country retains exclusive rights over aspects of his imagination.

The tradition that sidelines MacNeice in Ireland is also the tradition that sidelines the Irish experience of the Great War. Seamus Deane manages in *A Short History of Irish Literature*, in which he writes about O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* and Yeats's rejection of the play, to avoid mentioning the First World War: the issue discussed is "realism" and the need for a main protagonist, not the subject of Irish Great War involvement.⁵² He does point out that the First World War, the Russian Revolution

⁵⁰ See Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) Chs. 6-7.

⁵¹ "The Bitter Gourd: Some Problems of the Ulster Writer," *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt*, ed. Tom Clyde (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987) 115.

⁵² Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986) 164-65.

and the Irish “Troubles” contribute to Yeats’s “charged vision”,⁵³ but omits discussion of any Irish soldier poets - Ledwidge, MacGill, Kettle. Similarly, Jennifer Johnston’s *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, one of the outstanding fictional accounts of Irish enlistment in the First World War, is contextualised in a tradition of fiction dealing with the decay of the Big House.⁵⁴ While not necessarily disputing any of these readings as far as they go, and without wanting to attribute to Ledwidge or MacGill an importance in Irish literary history that, on one level, they do not have, it is worth noting that in a history of English literature, to omit discussion of the Great War’s impact on twentieth century writing would be almost impossible. In Ireland, where the war is one of several historical events, and not apparently the dominating one,⁵⁵ which influence twentieth century culture, it becomes more likely (if unfortunate in a book whose blurb suggests it is designed to “re-read sympathetically those we have insensitively undervalued or dismissed”). Declan Kiberd’s more recent *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*,⁵⁶ includes a short chapter on “The Great War and Irish Memory”, which is symptomatic of a growing recognition that this aspect of Irish history has been repressed. But the book noticeably fails to include any sustained consideration of MacNeice’s work.⁵⁷

Traces of the First World War - its imagery, its myths - are littered throughout MacNeice’s poetry, and cannot be explained merely as a manifestation of his “English” side, even if the absence of an Irish tradition of Great War writing has led him to seek “ancestors” among English and American poets (with the exception of Yeats). He finds initially, as do other thirties poets, that *The Waste Land* is the text that defines a generation: as Fussell explains, part of its appeal was that it was “more profoundly a ‘memory of war’ than one had thought...[with] its archduke, its rats and canals and

⁵³ Ibid. 159.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 225.

⁵⁵ Although, in some ways, the effect of the war on western civilization was such that, whether Ireland considered itself to be intimately involved or not, the consequences, not least of which was the massive influx of American cultural ideas into Europe, reverberated in many aspects of Irish life.

⁵⁶ (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995)

⁵⁷ Or of the work of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, both of whom share many of MacNeice’s themes.

dead men, its focus on fear, its dusty trees...and not least its settings of blasted landscapes and ruins".⁵⁸ It is, in that sense, the perfect expression of the post-war human condition, and MacNeice, in considering it, extends its scope outside England to emphasize its universality. He writes:

However deep one's ignorance, historically, of the Decline of the West, it has been since World War I something that must hit one in the marrow at adolescence; anyhow Waste Lands are not only community phenomena, there must be one somewhere in each individual...⁵⁹

The Waste Land is a way, then, of understanding the western world in the 1920s, but also, more fundamentally, of understanding the self that comes to maturity in that world. And whatever the appeal of "self-deception", which tantalises in *Autumn Journal* XVI, there is "no immunity" either for Ireland from that world or in Ireland for the self (133). An early poem, "River in Spate", is obviously indebted to Eliot, and to the First World War poets, with its "assault and battery" of words: "helter-skelter the coffins come and the drums beat....The corpses blink in the rush of the river..." (6). The imagery reappears, refined and more effective, throughout *Autumn Journal*, where the First World War is a touchstone for understanding the present and the future - the Second World War.

Autumn Journal's significance lies partly in the fact that it is an epitaph for a generation, partly in the fact that in the process of writing it it becomes apparent that there can be no such thing signed, sealed and delivered, in response to contemporary crisis. The fault-lines exposed in the late 1930s existed also in the earlier part of the century. Hence, section I is as much an ironic farewell to August 1914 as it is to the Long Weekend between the wars: the two become almost indistinguishable, and the mythic status in memory of both is apparent. In approaching the subject of war in the thirties, the First World War has to be elegized all over again, a resurrectional act that denies, even as it writes, epitaphs. MacNeice, less susceptible than others of the thirties generation to English political enthusiasms, has less back-tracking to undertake and is

⁵⁸ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 326.

⁵⁹ "When I was Twenty-One," *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice* 232.

quick to detect, because he never believed in, failing myths. August 1938 is primarily evocative of August 1914, but with the advantage of a hindsight that learned not to trust illusions in the last war and recognises them again:

Close and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire,
Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawns where close-clipped yew
Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals
And the spy-glasses hung in the hall and the prayer-books ready in the pew
And August going out to the tin trumpets of nasturtiums... (101)

That “the home is still a sanctum under the pelmets, / All quiet on the Family Front” (102), is one such illusion. If the lights can apparently go out all over Europe for a second time, it does suggest that they were never really turned back on again after the First World War. “Parapet” hovers behind “pelmet”: by implication there is no “sanctum” anywhere for anyone. The division in England between war-zone and home, a division which was never as clear-cut in Ireland, is, the inter-war years have shown, a fallacy. Gareth Reeves detects “Home Front” as the military metaphor behind “Family Front” in these lines.⁶⁰ But the phrase’s more obvious debt is “All quiet on the Western Front”, which, while it still locates blame for the present crisis in the Versailles Treaty, the “Peace” of the last war, also reminds of the reaction against war in the 1930s and the obvious dangers of a contradictory attempt to fight for peace. Remarque’s phenomenally best-selling *All Quiet on the Western Front*, published in 1929, consolidated certain views about war: that it was pointless, nihilistic, exploitative and so on. It inspired anti-war attitudes, but the attitude itself is not preventative. “All quiet on the Family Front” not only takes on the Myth of the War (the old men are to blame), it takes on the consequences of belief in that myth, and explores what “we learn after so many failures, / The building of castles in sand, or queens in snow” (102). “Insulate[d]... lives” come in many shapes and forms. When he writes “summer is going / South as I go North” (102), one senses that a past is being left behind for good, that there is no common ground between the retired generals and “the rebels and the young”. But in

⁶⁰ Michael O’Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 194.

effect, one can no more break with the past than with the present: in Section XXII he writes "I have taken my ticket south, I will not look back...Let us flee this country and leave its complications", but finds that "There is nothing new to learn" (146). What is stressed is continuity: past feeds into future and *vice versa*. The fallacies of the "Myth of the War" are exposed in relation to the next war. The flow of MacNeice's river in the poem is not disrupted by history; rather it is history, and to recognise that it cannot be disrupted - "no river is a river which does not flow" (102) - is to suggest that there are only variant readings of it at any given time, all of which may be inadequate. Throughout *Autumn Journal*, the world comes back on the poet; and it is ignorance of that world's plurality, an ignorance which resists historical imagination, that receives his strongest criticism. "The bloody frontier / Converges on our beds", and cannot be refuted or ignored: "it is no good saying / Take away this cup" (V, 109).

Because the Great War is implicitly to blame for the state of the world, it is the conflict to which MacNeice instinctively turns when addressing the issue of conflict, as does Yeats in the Civil War. Part of its appeal, in the sections on Spain (VI) and the possibility of a Second World War (VII), is that its ready-made images can both evoke and simultaneously deconstruct idealism, probably a fairly accurate measure of the confused ideology leading up to the Second World War.⁶¹ Spain is to the thirties poets what Flanders was to the Georgians:

...Spain would soon denote
Our grief, our aspirations;
 ...our blunt
Ideals would find their whetstone,...our spirit
Would find its frontier on the Spanish front,
Its body in a rag-tag army. (112)

⁶¹ Cf. Orwell: "The thing that, to me, was truly frightening about the war in Spain was not such violence as I witnessed...but the immediate reappearance in left-wing circles of the mental atmosphere of the Great War. The very people who for twenty years had sniggered over their own superiority to war hysteria were the ones who rushed straight back into the mental slum of 1915." "Inside the Whale" 567.

The “rag-tag army” instantly evokes a memory of what Robert Graves describes as “the amateur, desperate, happy-go-lucky, ragtime, lousy army of World War I”.⁶² There is, MacNeice is acutely aware, some 1914-style idealism on the Spanish issue, an idealism which, because of the events of 1914-18, only needs to be hinted at to raise awareness of tragedy. Similarly, in the next section, in the lines “They want the crest of the hill...” and “searchlights probe the heavens...” (113), he inclines towards the “high” diction characteristically associated with, and a casualty of, the Great War.⁶³ The rhetoric is in ironic contrast to the events it describes - no steeds or warriors here, but “anti-aircraft guns” and “bacilli” (113). But the differences may be little more than superficial. The “soldiers in lorries” are in “tumbrils” (113) - sacrificial lambs to the slaughter whose only advantage over their predecessors in the Great War is that they are forewarned of their fate. “I feel astounded”, he writes “That things have gone so far” (114). Yet the irony of these lines is that deep down things have gone nowhere. The political outlook of his generation, defined in relation to one war, is bound to compromise in the face of another, and to replay what was once resisted:

the issue
 Involving principle but bound in fact
 To squander principle in panic and self-deception-
 Accessories after the act,
 So that all we foresee is rivers in spate sprouting
 With drowning hands
 And men like dead frogs floating till the rivers
 Lose themselves in the sands.
 And we who have been brought up to think of ‘Gallant Belgium’
 As so much blague
 Are now preparing again to essay good through evil
 For the sake of Prague. (114)

The difference between fighting for Prague or for Belgium is primarily one of tone and attitude: it does not involve a change in action. The vision of horror - “men like dead frogs” - is not, as in the early “River in Spate” a vision of a post-war world based on a war remembered, it is remembrance in advance of the fact using the imagery available

⁶² “The Poets of World War II,” *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1949) 310.

⁶³ See Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 21-22.

from the previous war. (Oddly, the Second World War itself does not spawn such images, probably because they *were* so readily available in advance.)

Despite all the efforts of the thirties generation to understand their role in relation to the war, MacNeice suggests that the contradiction inherent in an attempt to “essay good through evil” confounds them as it confounded the liberal generation of 1914.⁶⁴ The attempt to avoid confronting such dilemmas - “Glory to God for Munich” (117) - an attempt which, in presuming to learn from the First World War, does the opposite, is itself critiqued by MacNeice. Evasion of responsibility becomes an impossibility in the face of war. The time when he could “getaway...into the green / Fields in the past of English history” with “no look back to the burning city”(116), even in the time of the slump, is a time of childlike innocence. What eventually becomes apparent is that there is no escape from the “burning city”: it is a permanent condition. “The Czechs / Go down and without fighting” (117), the phrase hinting back at the down and out sufferers of the Depression years, and if he was oblivious then he cannot be oblivious now: “I no longer / Docket a place in the sun” (116). By implication, the politicians involved in Munich are accused of a childlike innocence that is dangerous. MacNeice on the other hand has “no ivory tower, no funk-hole” (116): as with the First World War poets, the demands of the time place demands on poetry which, even if they are impossible, are preferable to a poetry which exempts itself from responsibility. For even failure, with appropriate Yeatsian gestures, can be heroic: “That Rome was not built in a day is no excuse / For *laissez-faire*, for bowing to the odds against us....” (128).

The “irreversible presentness” of the past is a constant theme in *Autumn Journal*. The stylised form of remembrance of war, which is still current in England, takes on the quality of nightmare in section XV. Remembering victims of the Great War, in England and Ulster, can be a way of assuaging guilt: for MacNeice those victims provoke feelings of guilt. The sentiment is hardly the well-known “Age shall not

⁶⁴ The problem is one to which he returns again and again, in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* and, after the Second World War, in *Autumn Sequel*: “Did we know / That when that came which we had said would come, / We still should be proved wrong?” (Canto I, 334).

weary them / Nor the years condemn”;⁶⁵ rather it presents a nightmare scenario in which they are both wearied and condemned:

...I cannot see their faces
Walking in file, slowly in file;
...
Where have we seen them before?
Was it the murderer on the nursery ceiling
Or Judas Iscariot in the Field of Blood
Or someone at Gallipoli or in Flanders
Caught in the end-all mud. (130)

The lines are reminiscent of Eliot’s:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.⁶⁶

They are reminiscent also of descriptions of the file of men marching past the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day, men who represent not the living but the dead. MacNeice’s ghosts include those who betray as well as those who are betrayed: the complexities of memory conflict with remembrance, denial of the past with a sensed responsibility to the past.⁶⁷

The nightmare of section XV fuels the indictment of Ireland in XVI. Nightmare is cured by action: the desire to be the man of action in wartime is the desire for an uncomplicated role, and to view the world in simple binary oppositions:

...I envy the intransigence of my own

⁶⁵ Laurence Binyon “For the Fallen,” *Minds at War: Essential Poetry of the First World War in Context*, ed. David Roberts (Burgess Hill: Saxon Books, 1996) 56-7. The poem was in fact written before most of the fallen actually fell. It appeared in *The Times* in Sept. 1914, and it anticipates in advance the kind of psychological approach required to deal with the casualties of war on the scale of the Great War - victory in death, a worthwhile endeavour etc. Obliquely it suggests that they were privileged to die: “They shall not grow old / As we that are left grow old...”.

⁶⁶ T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1974) 65.

⁶⁷ In *Autumn Sequel*, war remembrance in London dwindles to ahistorical ritual: “London now prepares / Old guys to burn and poppies to remember / Dead soldiers with and soup for the Lord Mayor’s / Banquet, all items proper to November” (Canto XVII, 400-401). Those tokens are in ironic contrast to the painful remembering in the powerful and elegiac Laments for the Maker, Dylan Thomas, in Cantos XVIII and XX, (a remembering which also leads the poet to re-situate himself in relation to other deaths - Yeats’s, Higgins’s - and the “half way home” sensibility previously explored in Canto V (350)).

Countrymen who shoot to kill and never
See the victim's face become their own
Or find his motives sabotage their motives. (131)

But the consequence of such a view is political and imaginative sterility. Thus, Maud Gonne, with all the potential to view Irish history in its full complexity - an English mother, a soldier father, and Nationalist sympathies - opts instead for a myth of history to validate present action that binds people to "continuance of hatred" (132). Paul Fussell suggests that the atmosphere of "simple antithesis" dominated the Great War, encouraging a "modern *versus* habit: one thing opposed to another not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes...but with a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for". This is "the atmosphere in which most poems of the Great War take place, and that is the reason for the failure of most of them as durable art".⁶⁸ MacNeice applies to Ireland artistic lessons learned partly from the Great War, and discovers a failure of rhetoric north and south:

And one read black where the other read white, his hope
The other man's damnation:
Up the Rebels, To Hell with the Pope,
And God save - as you prefer - the King or Ireland. (132)

This is the world in black and white, politics as a zero-sum game, and is, he suggests, due to man's "basic illogicality; he just cannot cope with the world in colour".⁶⁹

IV.

If the Second World War forces into perspective the First World War, and *vice versa*, for MacNeice it also forces into perspective Ireland, Yeats's Ireland, and the issue of how to address the subject of war in poetry. It is significant that the onset of war is the time when MacNeice's need to evaluate his own relationship with Yeats finds its most detailed expression. Yeats, in the midst of civil war, forges a poetics of war in *A Vision*.

⁶⁸ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 79, 82.

⁶⁹ Louis MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 112.

MacNeice, in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, attempts to come to terms with that Yeatsian vision, to take and discard from it as he sees necessary, in the context of a different war. And it is in defining his relationship with Yeats that he comprehensively addresses the issues of art, Ireland, and war, which preoccupied Yeats and MacNeice throughout their careers. The quest, in both cases, though under different political pressures, is to find a way of responding to violence which does not necessarily involve waving a flag for one side or the other, but does not thereby diminish the relevance of poetry.

A factor behind consideration of any such issues is the extent to which contemporary Northern Irish poets, writing in another war, have become the lens through which MacNeice is viewed. That Northern Irish poets have brought his reputation to rest in Ireland is now a commonplace, most studies of the poet following, or at least taking into account, the line endorsed by Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Edna Longley, and Paul Muldoon. (His biographer, Jon Stallworthy, relies heavily on the critical view of MacNeice propounded by Edna Longley.) Peter McDonald, in his detailed study of MacNeice in his contexts, points out perceptively that “canons in relation to which his work is often read are all liable to be *changed* by his writing, that the ‘1930s myth’, as much as Irish ‘identity’, becomes something different once it accommodates his poetry in full”.⁷⁰ MacNeice, he writes, “has always sent the canonical compass bearings haywire”.⁷¹ Contemporary Northern Irish poetry has done the same. The persistent MacNeicean echoes in Northern Irish writing indicate that a poet who remained in his lifetime “homeless everywhere” has found, posthumously, a tribal homeland. MacNeice’s endeavour to point to the limitations of the English and Irish literary canons which were, in part, constructed in response to the traumatic upheaval of the Great War is still pertinent to his “descendents”.⁷²

⁷⁰ Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 9. McDonald’s introduction, “Canons and Contexts”, provides an acute and concise overview of MacNeice’s problematic position in the Thirties generation, and the canon of Irish literature.

⁷¹ Ibid. 5.

⁷² Longley, Mahon and Heaney, working with the “duality of cultural reference” that also characterised MacNeice, have all in different ways suffered misrepresentation in English and Irish literary traditions.

In *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, MacNeice emphasizes two main themes that affect any understanding of the impact of the Great War on his work, and, revealed through this, his understanding of his place in English and Irish traditions: first, that “the Auden school” is in some ways closer to Yeats than to Eliot; second, that Eliot was misunderstood by Yeats, the two poets having more in common than either ever acknowledged. Edna Longley suggests that “MacNeice’s consciousness of Yeats...bridges his own double context”.⁷³ It is, more specifically, his consciousness of the relation between Eliot and Yeats, or, to narrow it further, between two different ways of imagining war, which bridges that context. It would be fair to say at this point that Yeats’s reading of modern poetry acquired a status among his disciples that Yeats never fully accorded it himself. On the contrary, his instinct as an artist was towards what Seamus Deane dismissively describes as “literary unionism”,⁷⁴ a phrase that has to be rehabilitated in a MacNeicean context. MacNeice, not surprisingly, is at pains to point out that an Irish separatist approach to poetry does not yield the results Yeats would have wanted:

Most of his Irish successors followed him in eschewing the industrial world and in writing their verses carefully, but they followed him in little else. There is rarely much meat on their poems. Yeats himself seems at times to have felt impatient with them, to have turned away towards English poets who were breaking his own rules.⁷⁵

MacNeice’s own impatience with the sub-Yeatsian approach, in the sphere of literature and politics, is evident in his attitude towards Ireland in the Second World War. In *Autumn Journal*, Ireland appears at times as representative of an illusory escapist zone - “the linen which I lie on came from Ireland / In the easy days / When all I thought of was affection and comfort” (110); “Ireland is small enough / To be still thought of with a family feeling” (133) - although that feeling is exposed as a myth: “It is self-deception of course...” (133). In “The Closing Album” (originally titled “The Coming of War”)

⁷³ *Louis MacNeice: A Study* 27-8.

⁷⁴ *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea*, Field Day Pamphlet No. 4 (Derry: Field Day, 1984). Rpt. in *Ireland’s Field Day* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 50.

⁷⁵ *PWBY* 179-80.

Ireland is used, on one level, as a focal point for contrast with the rest of Europe: “a hundred swans / Dreaming on the harbour...” (166); “distant hills / Made as it were out of clouds and sea” (165). The image created is of a kind of Celtic Twilight Ireland, a dream of pastoral, a world so far removed from the commercial culture across the water, that he marvels “What a place to talk of War” (165). In a way, the reason why one must talk of war comes in the first section, “Dublin”. The “mist on the Wicklow hills / Is close”, true, but only as close (or far) as “the Irish to the Anglo-Irish / As the killer is close one moment / To the man he kills...” (164). Dublin is not an escape from the world; at best it provides a vantage point for the poet who, like “Nelson on his pillar” is “Watching his world collapse” (163).⁷⁶ Stylistically, the example behind this poem is Yeats’s “Easter 1916”; like “Easter 1916” it searches for perspective in a context where everything familiar has been overturned. When war finally and inescapably invades “The Closing Album”, in section V, the sense of place is destabilised: it is, as a result, the section with no name. If Ireland appeared as the war-free zone, the place of stability, two things become apparent by the end of the poem: that there is no escape in Ireland any more than anywhere else, and that in realising that fact, the poet still discovers in the self the qualities which counterbalance war, and which, because they are not explicable, cannot be legislated into existence any more than out of it. The poem’s final question, like many of MacNeice’s questions, is not really a question at all, since it remembers in the act of querying why one should remember:

And why, now it has happened
 And doom all night is lapping at the door,
 Should I remember that I ever met you-
 Once in another world? (167)

Through the way he approaches Ireland in the Second World War, MacNeice also negotiates with a Yeatsian Ireland. The “hundred swans” in “Galway” look back to Yeats, as does the third stanza of “Neutrality”:

⁷⁶ Prophetically, as it turns out. The statue was blown up in the 1950s.

Look into your heart, you will find fermenting rivers,
Intricacies of gloom and glint,
You will find such ducats of dream and great doubloons of ceremony
As nobody to-day would mint. (202)

He critiques here Irish neutrality in World War II partly through a critique of Yeats's "A Prayer for my Daughter", where to counteract the "great gloom" in his mind, Yeats turns to "custom and ceremony" as the begetters of "innocence and beauty". That kind of activity has become for MacNeice, when it extends outside the scope of Yeats's poetry, dangerously introspective:

But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks
A continent close, dark, as archetypal sin,
While to the west off your own shores the mackerel
Are fat - on the flesh of your kin. (203)

Yeats, one might say, formulates a system which, while it might enable his own poetry, is not of itself inspirational for later poets. In content at least, he "is not a poet to imitate".⁷⁷ MacNeice writes that:

The modern poet is very conscious that he is writing in and of an industrial epoch and that what expresses itself visibly in pylons and gasometers is the same force that causes the discontent and discomfort of the modern individual, the class-warfare of modern society, and wars between nations in the modern world.⁷⁸

In Yeats's poetry, where aeroplanes, Zeppelins and trains have at best only a walk-on part, a way is found of dealing with that modern world, but the strength of his example lies in the fact that he demonstrated the possibility of survival as a poet in the modern world without compromise rather than in the method used to do so. T.S. Eliot appears initially as the only example for the generation seeking a way of "play[ing] Hamlet in the shadow of the gas-works".⁷⁹ But this view is one which MacNeice was to substantially revise in the 1930s. The essay in which it is explained is, significantly, entitled "Eliot and the Adolescent". That *The Waste Land* was a profoundly influential poem for the post-war generation is not disputed. But influence is not static, nor is it

⁷⁷ *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* 64.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 149.

always conscious, and, as with poetry itself, is not something which exists in a vacuum.

MacNeice compares *The Waste Land* with "The Second Coming", and finds that:

The mere difference in versification between Eliot and Yeats represents here an essential difference in attitude; for Eliot both hope and heroism have vanished with regular metric, with punctuation. When the Auden school appeared, who were nominally affiliated to Communism, they showed much superficial resemblance to Eliot but, below the surface, they were actually nearer to Yeats...Like Yeats they opposed to the contemporary chaos a code of values, a belief in system, and - behind their utterances of warning - a belief in life, in the dignity, courage and stamina of the human animal.⁸⁰

This view is elaborated upon throughout *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*.⁸¹ But side by side with the exploration of the differences between Yeats and Eliot, and therefore the different levels of influence they have on the Auden school, is a recognition of similarities. MacNeice does not simply reverse the roles of the two main protagonists; rather, in revising the conventional view of Eliot in relation to the thirties, he also interrogates Yeats's critical reading of Eliot's poetry, and reinterprets the thirties poets in the light of an inclusive, cross-cultural scenario. Yeats, he suggests, since he "failed to see the peculiar virtues of Eliot, must almost certainly have failed to see his own affinities with him". And for MacNeice they overlap on fairly crucial points:

...both hanker for a hierarchic social system. They both combine speculative and sceptical habits with a somewhat frustrated urge to religion. They both dislike the liberal conception of progress and democracy; Eliot described the modern world as 'worm-eaten with liberalism'.⁸²

Rather than seeing Eliot as representing "a reaction against Yeats and Yeats's poetry", a view which is inaccurate because "Yeats's account of Eliot's poetry is inadequate and incorrect",⁸³ MacNeice instead sees his own generation as in some ways reacting against both of them. He himself hankers after a very different social system. Yeats's

⁸⁰ *PWBY* 120-21. For discussion of the relationship between Yeats and Auden, their similarities and dissimilarities, see Jacqueline Genet, "W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden," *Comparison and Impact* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987) 95-110, vol 2 of *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World*, ed. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok.

⁸¹ See *PWBY* 188-92.

⁸² *PWBY* 188.

⁸³ *PWBY* 189.

rejection of liberalism and his refusal to recognise the industrial revolution on one level limits his influence.

But if both Yeats and Eliot offer a world-view which is alien to the next generation, in MacNeice's scheme of things, Yeats still comes out on top as the poet whose work is, regardless of his politics, relevant to the dilemmas of the late 1930s in a way Eliot's is not. He does so because war, and its relation to poetry, is the overriding concern of *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. If it is true to say that poetry still seeks answers to the questions raised by the Great War, and is obliged to validate and revalidate its function in response to subsequent world crises (the Second World War, Auschwitz, the Cold War), then the motivation behind MacNeice's study of Yeats is instantly understandable - as Richard Ellmann points out, his desire was probably "to establish the reality of poetry at a moment when it seemed most tenuous".⁸⁴ The consequences - not least of which is that Yeats's poetry and politics became separable for MacNeice in a way they would not be without a war-dominated context - are complicated and far-reaching.

In the Introduction to *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, MacNeice writes:

If the war made nonsense of Yeats's poetry and of all works that are called 'escapist', it also made nonsense of the poetry that professes to be 'realist'. My friends had been writing for years about guns and frontiers and factories, about the 'facts' of psychology, politics, science, economics, but the fact of war made their writing seem as remote as the pleasure dome in Xanadu. For war spares neither the poetry of Xanadu nor the poetry of pylons. I gradually inferred, as I recovered from the shock of war, that both these kinds of poetry stand or fall together. War does not prove that one is better or worse than the other; it attempts to disprove both. But poetry must not be disproved. If war is the test of reality, then all poetry is unreal; but in that case unreality is a virtue. If, on the other hand, war is a great enemy of reality, although an incontestable fact, then reality is something which is not exactly commensurable with facts. Yeats all his life was a professed enemy of facts...⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Foreword, *PWBY* 10.

⁸⁵ *PWBY* 17-18. Orwell criticises MacNeice's earlier book, *Modern Poetry*, for what he sees as its assumption that Auden *et al* offer a more effective form of protest than was achieved by T.S. Eliot during the Great War, and attributes the assumption to an ignorance among the Thirties poets of what war was actually like. See "Inside the Whale," 574-75. The criticism is not wholly justifiable with regard to *Modern Poetry*, although it does contain an element of truth as regards some, if not

Yeats, rather than Eliot, indulges what Mahon, after Wallace Stevens, describes as the poet's "rage for order". He does so, in MacNeice's view, not by falsifying experience, but by keeping "his questions comparatively simple" and thus avoiding "hopelessly inadequate answers". Rupert Brooke, on the other hand, in the Great War makes the mistake of trying to "hitch his [romantic individualism] to the cause of the Allies in the Great War", an attempt which, because the Great War was "a mere negation of ideals", was "doomed to complete failure".⁸⁶ MacNeice is not suggesting that poets should avoid the Great War, but he is implicitly endorsing what Yeats once pointed out to others - that the Great War can never be a suitable cause for poetry if it is simultaneously allowed to disprove that poetry: as Yeats put it "The mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you...".⁸⁷ One cannot blame a specific war - and one war may, after all, stand for any war - since it is also evident that if the Great War disproved Brooke's poetry, it did not disprove Owen's or Yeats's. MacNeice is objecting, in Brooke's poetry, to the same thing he objects to in Irish or Ulster historical myths - "sentimental falsification", which is not vindicated by popular support. (All that support does is "widen[s] the basis of the lie".) He argues instead for a transposition into poetry of "personal values": the poem "derives from and has to be referred back to the life outside him, which means, in the first instance, the life of the poet. In the same way the life of the poet, though also an individual thing, derives from and has to be referred back to the life outside him."⁸⁸ So, in MacNeice's reasoning, when Eliot argues that the poet must adapt himself to his world, then unlike Yeats he is compromising the relations between the poem, the poet, and the life outside, and diminishing the proactive role of poetry. If the thirties poets argue for a system diametrically opposed to Yeats's own, they are still adopting a Yeatsian approach by asserting a viewpoint against the odds: MacNeice writes that "Poets like Auden and Spender...returned to the old arrogant

all of the generation explored in that book. In a way, MacNeice, in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, concedes aspects of Orwell's argument.

⁸⁶ *PWBY* 30.

⁸⁷ "To Sean O'Casey," 20 Apr. 1928, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 741.

⁸⁸ *PWBY* 29.

principle - which was Yeats's too - that it is the poet's job to make sense of the world, to simplify it, to put shape on it". The whole problem of the Yeatsian inheritance - the fascist tendencies, the aristocratic elitism - is in some ways overcome without much difficulty in the next sentences: "The fact that these younger poets proposed to stylize their world in accordance with communist doctrine or psychological theory (both things repugnant to Yeats) is comparatively irrelevant. Whatever their system was, they stood with Yeats for system against chaos, for a positive art against a passive impressionism."⁸⁹ Liberalism, Hynes suggests, at the end of the thirties, when it appeared to be dead and buried, seemed to "rise from its grave like Banquo and demand new sympathy".⁹⁰ To assert liberal values, when they appear to have failed, is, then, an heroic gesture comparable with Yeats's rejection of them. (MacNeice's own "Epitaph for Liberal Poets" takes a Yeatsian, if more lightheartedly expressed, view of the age as engendering its opposite: "The Individual has died before" [210].)

Because the strength of Yeats's example is dissociated from his politics, he and his Ireland are "democratized" for subsequent generations. The fundamental problem with Yeats's war poetry as a model is his corresponding attitudes towards war. Yeats, MacNeice is aware, "began to conceive of life as a developing whole, a whole which depends upon the conflict of the parts". That he began, therefore, "to write in praise of war", is for MacNeice "a false inference from a premiss which is essentially valid".⁹¹ Yeats's "All creation is from conflict"⁹² is accepted; "Love war because of its horror"⁹³ is rejected. Where Heaney tries to re-evaluate Yeats in humanitarian terms, probably an impossibility, MacNeice works on the assumption that Yeats's politics and aesthetic are separable, not in the light of his poetry, but in the light of his influence: "The spiritual lesson that my generation...can learn from Yeats is to write according to our lights. His lights are not ours. *Go thou and do otherwise*. He can serve us also, perhaps, as an

⁸⁹ *PWBY* 191.

⁹⁰ *The Auden Generation* 301.

⁹¹ *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* 118.

⁹² *Autobiographies* 576.

⁹³ *A Vision* 52.

example of zest...there is nearly always a leaping vitality - the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp.”⁹⁴

Michael Allen details the elements which make up what he calls the “Longley Canon of MacNeice” from the mid-1960s through to publication of *The Living Stream*. They include articles by Michael Longley - “A Misrepresented Poet” (1967), “A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice” (1975) - a reading by Mahon, Heaney and Longley in 1966 to celebrate the publication of MacNeice’s *Collected Poems*, lectures and seminars by Edna Longley in the late 1960s, a series of publications on MacNeice by Edna Longley from 1983 onwards, including several articles and a full-length study of MacNeice’s poetry in 1988 and also Michael Longley’s editorship of the new MacNeice *Selected Poems* (in which role he replaces, appropriately enough, W.H.Auden).⁹⁵ (It was also rumoured at one time that Michael Longley and Edna Longley would write the official biography of MacNeice.⁹⁶)

Following on from his 1967 defence of MacNeice as “A Misrepresented Poet”,⁹⁷ Michael Longley writes in 1975 that “[j]udgements would be more precise if the Northern Irish context were taken into account”,⁹⁸ partly because “Ulster is a limbo between two (three?) cultures”.⁹⁹ Earlier than this, Mahon applies MacNeice’s philosophy to Northern Irish poetry when he claims that the Northern poet, “surrounded as he is by the Greek gifts of modern industry...must, to be true to his imagination, insist upon a different court of appeal from that which sits in the South” and suggests that “a war remains to be won...between...the fluidity of a possible life...and the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural”.¹⁰⁰ What reads here as a (self) defence of what is felt to be a vulnerable position is taken up by Edna

⁹⁴ PWBY 197.

⁹⁵ Michael Allen, “Louis MacNeice and Michael Longley,” *Louis MacNeice and his Influence: A Symposium*, ed. Alan Peacock and Kathleen Devine (Colin Smythe, forthcoming). I am grateful to Michael Allen for allowing me sight of this paper before publication.

⁹⁶ This was noted in the headline to an article by Michael Longley, “The Northerner”, in the *Sunday Independent* 26 Sept. 1976.

⁹⁷ Michael Longley, “A Misrepresented Poet,” *Dublin Magazine* 6.1 (Spring 1967): 68-74.

⁹⁸ “The Neolithic Night: A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice,” *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1975) 104.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 99.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Mahon, “Poetry in Northern Ireland,” *Twentieth Century Studies* 4 (November 1970): 93.

Longley as a defence of Northern Irish poetry as a distinct (from Southern writing) entity, of the “traditionalist” nature of much of that poetry, and, finally, of the way in which Northern Irish poets have responded to the “troubles” in Northern Ireland. For the most part, MacNeice enters that debate on his own terms because his own terms as they appear in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* are the standard in Longley’s criticism against which everything else is measured.

Inevitably, there is a danger of seeming to attribute to MacNeice an agenda, or at least a purpose, which he could not possibly have had. When Edna Longley writes that “MacNeice...connects Anglo-Irish and English poetry (Yeats and Auden), and both with contemporary Northern Irish poetry (Yeats with Derek Mahon)”,¹⁰¹ retrospective readings of MacNeice’s influence and MacNeice’s own conscious endeavours conflate in syntactical (tactical?) confusion. MacNeice is unearthed in a “troubled” Northern Ireland he never experienced fully equipped to join the fray, a procedure tentatively validated by the epigraph used for the essay: “A house can be haunted by those who were never there / If there was where they were missed.” But projecting forwards in this way has also been the key to relocating MacNeice’s writing in the context of two world wars. In the Introduction to *Poetry in the Wars* Longley writes: “Perhaps ‘war’, not ‘history’ or ‘politics’, covers the broadest imaginative contingencies; indicating that poetry engages - *as poetry* - on many battlegrounds.”¹⁰² This statement should probably be considered in the light of the more controversial, and frequently criticised: “Poetry and politics, like church and state, should be separated.”¹⁰³ Both comments appear to be validated in and by *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. To take “war” as an inclusive category is to reiterate, through MacNeice’s interpretation, Yeats’s “All creation is from conflict”. Poetry engages “as poetry”, not as propaganda or manifesto: it can therefore be in conflict with the “facts” if not with “reality”; and in engaging as poetry, it presumably stands on ground where it cannot be “disproved”. And it is poetry’s

¹⁰¹ “Louis MacNeice: ‘The Walls are Flowing’,” *Across a Roaring Hill: the Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland*, ed. Edna Longley and Gerald Dawe (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1985) 99.

¹⁰² (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 10.

¹⁰³ *Poetry in the Wars* 185.

separation from “politics” that saves it, or should save it, from the disastrous misrepresentation of which MacNeice finds Brooke to be guilty. Ulster poets are, Longley writes, “sometimes the victims of improper expectations. Whatever causes they may support as citizens, their imaginations cannot be asked to settle for less than full human truth”.¹⁰⁴

Longley’s preoccupations, in *Poetry in the Wars*, are, like MacNeice’s, engendered by a world where the “shockwaves” of the First World War are still “rippling through”.¹⁰⁵ Both look to the First World War poets to help define the position of their own generations. Problems of remembrance in relation to that war are, in Northern Ireland, still in some ways sensitive and unapproachable ones. To understand how the Great War can be approached imaginatively is also, then, in *Poetry in the Wars*, to understand the role of poetry in the Northern Ireland “troubles”: the “redefinition” of the Great War’s “literary and social languages” is, Longley suggests, a “continuing dynamic”. Northern Ireland’s poetry is offered as a “corollary” of Great War poetry, in its “searching for balance - on a shifting front line - between close-up and perspective, documentation and symbol, presumption and responsibility”.¹⁰⁶ Because MacNeice’s poetry has “been there before”,¹⁰⁷ he is “canonized” as someone who is forced to disrupt canonical stability to make sense of his own context. Longley plays out a situation whereby the poetic response to World War I becomes a yardstick for measuring the Northern Irish poetic response to the Troubles, or rather the expectations about that response. Samuel Hynes, as McDonald points out, has more recently modified the views on MacNeice expressed in the 1976 *The Auden Generation*.¹⁰⁸ It is the “renaissance” in Northern Irish poetry which has caused this change in perspective. Northern Ireland provides a context for MacNeice, but, more

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 185. Cf. MacNeice: “a poem is vitiated if it relies upon a falsehood to life”. *PWBY* 29.

¹⁰⁵ *Poetry in the Wars* 12.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Edna Longley, “Louis MacNeice: ‘The Walls Are Flowing’” 99.

¹⁰⁸ See *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* 4. McDonald quotes Hynes’s 1989 review of MacNeice’s *Selected Poems*: “For a time after his death his reputation sagged....That the situation has altered in recent years is due in large measure to the way in which MacNeice has been adopted as an ancestor by the present generation of Northern Irish poets.”

significantly, it reworks other contexts for him. The belated recognition of the importance of the First World War in Irish history has been brought about in part because of the unresolved questions that resurfaced in the Northern Ireland Troubles. To evaluate MacNeice from the perspective of the later conflict is also to force his re-evaluation in terms of the earlier one. And, conversely, if the First World War moves to centre stage, MacNeice, with a way of remembering history and revising literary history that certain forms of remembrance in both Ireland and England have often obscured, moves with it.

II. The Northern Renaissance

Chapter 5



Northern Ireland and the Politics of Remembrance

"At the beginning I was taken aback by the scale and ferocity of the violence. I continue to be dumbfounded by the awfulness of our situation. All my political prognostications have been wrong. I have written a few inadequate elegies out of my bewilderment and despair. I offer them as wreaths. That is all."

-Michael Longley¹

I.

Fifty years after the Armistice that ended the war to end all wars, Northern Ireland erupted into a violent conflict which, rather like the Great War, took many by surprise, in spite of the retrospectively knowledgeable readings of signposts to the conflict. There was a sense, as Heaney noted in 1966, that "something is rotten", but also the hope that "maybe if we wait it will fester to death".² Instead, the Civil Rights movement protests, which tried to redress that rottenness, mutated into a conflict organised on largely sectarian lines, whose unresolved difficulties lay in the founding and existence of the Northern Irish "state" itself. The *Sunday Times* insight team noted in April 1969 that:

The monster of sectarian violence is well out of its cage. The issue now is no longer Civil Rights or even houses and jobs. The issue is now whether the state should exist and who should have the power, and how it should be defended; and this is an issue on which the wild men on both sides have sworn for 40 years, frequently in blood, that they will never back down.³

Since the Troubles in Northern Ireland over the last thirty years have been caused in part by the far-reaching implications of an earlier period of conflict - 1912 to 1922 - the temptation to view contemporary Northern Ireland in terms of the First World War era appears to have been almost irresistible. In 1938, it was argued that "the present

¹ "An Interview with Michael Longley," by Dermot Healy, *The Southern Review* 31.3 (July 1995): 560.

² Quoted in R.F.Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988) 586.

³ Quoted in Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1992) 664.

system” in north-east Ulster “forces all concerned to hostility, as it is a product of war machinery”.⁴ And as such, in other words, how could Northern Ireland be anything other than a state *at war*. Significantly, the post-1968 Troubles are, or have been perceived as, a “war” - Gerry Adams, at the 1987 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, described the armed conflict as a “war of attrition”.⁵ Maurice Goldring, speculating on the reasons for such a perception, which is not necessarily applied to violent events elsewhere in the world concludes:

War is not defined by the numbers of bombs and casualties. War is a state of mind as much as the use of military strength. It is obvious, dramatically clear, over here [Northern Ireland] that people have a war in their minds even if it is not on their doorsteps. Everybody knows that any move by any paramilitary group is politically as important as a political statement or agreement - often more so. War is the great simplifier. It is simple, clear. A barricade has only two sides. There are allies and enemies, victors and vanquished. You win or you lose. War excludes anything that is not related to the supreme aim of victory. Society in Northern Ireland seems to an outsider an oasis of certainties in a troubled world.⁶

In the British media, the conflict is often represented, or rather misrepresented, as stagnant and endlessly repetitive in its form: the ground(s) on or over which the conflict takes place have been popularly perceived as unchanging (witness the confusion caused to the media position by the 1994 ceasefire).⁷ At best, the situation appears to move one step forward only to take two steps back. The *Sunday Times* comments, quoted above, set the tone for the perceptions of the next two and a half decades: a blood feud

⁴ W.S. Armour, *Ulster, Ireland, Britain: A Forgotten Trust* (London: Duckworth, 1938) 16.

⁵ Quoted in the *Irish News* 9 Nov. 1987: 6. It is more likely that Sinn Féin would choose to use the word “war”, since it implies legitimate resistance rather than the civil disobedience Unionism might claim IRA activity to be. Since the word “war” is so politically loaded in Northern Ireland, I have chosen to use the word “conflict” to describe the armed struggle taking place. I do not, however, intend “conflict” in relation to the Northern Ireland Troubles in the way in which I have used it to discuss “conflict” in Yeats’s aesthetic, where I argued that forms of conflict may still, unlike “war”, be compatible with peace.

⁶ “On Top of That,” *Fortnight* (Feb. 1988): 25.

⁷ Jon Snow writes that “[t]he record of the media in reporting Northern Ireland has, at best, been patchy....For the bulk of the ‘troubles’, British-based TV’s commitment to reporting the region was low. By...the mid-70s, the job had become a ‘bomb watch’. Neither BBC nor ITV had much interest in any other way of approaching what was happening....We had one rule throughout the ‘troubles’ at ITN. No death from the violence was to go unreported. And so, for 25 years, we chronicled the killing. The viewer was as bored as the vast majority of politicians.” “End of an Unseemly Era,” *Fortnight* 332 (Oct. 1994): 25.

originating, at least in its present form, in the earlier part of the century, demanding blood sacrifices, and appearing to hold some essential quality which makes it unresolvable.

These perceptions of the Troubles find their parallel in the First World War, in the stagnant position of troops in the trenches, where one officer calculated that at their current rate of progress it would take 180 years to reach the Rhine,⁸ who fought and advanced only to find themselves, a year later, back in the same trenches they started from, who believed that the war would last forever, and who thus accepted that trench warfare had, in effect, become a permanent way of life. The Great War is the first “war of attrition”, the war which puts the phrase itself, without the quotation marks first tentatively applied to it, into common use. It is the ultimate manifestation of the cost, in human terms, of zero-sum political thinking, a war whose tale is told through its casualty figures rather than its political rationale. It is also the war in which the enemy shares one’s own characteristics, suffers in the same situation.⁹

Viewing Northern Ireland through the lens of 1914-18 is a tendency reinforced by the rhetoric still current in the articulation of various political positions in the province. Echoing those who argued the inconsistency of Ulster Unionist behaviour in 1912-14 (the protestation of loyalty; the preparation for armed resistance; a seat in the war cabinet for the man who approved and inspired that resistance) Seamus Mallon, discussing the unionist objections to the British Government’s 1995 framework document, queried: “Are the unionists now questioning the right of that sovereign British government”, to which they declare loyalty. They were accused, by Adams, of “playing the Orange card” (again). John Hume noted the apparent contradiction in the Unionist position if they were to reject proposals put forward by Westminster, since

⁸ See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) 72.

⁹ It is partly this recognition that prompted the enormous success of E.M. Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in England. Robert McLiam Wilson also locates this as the ultimate irony of the Northern Irish conflict: “The tragedy was that Northern Ireland (Scottish) Protestants thought themselves like the British. Northern Ireland (Irish) Catholics thought themselves like Eireans (proper Irish). The comedy was that any once-strong difference had long melted away and they resembled no one now as much as they resembled each other. The world saw this and mostly wondered...” *Eureka Street* (London: Minerva, 1997) 163.

they accept British sovereignty, and therefore the British Parliament.¹⁰ With a return of the passive optimism enclosing divisive language characteristic of attitudes earlier in the century, a spokesperson from the Republic suggested recently that “[h]opefully we [the Republic] will persuade them [the Unionists] one day to join us”.¹¹ At the other end of the spectrum, some of the loyalist rhetoric of recent years would not look out of place if it were called upon to deal with the 1912-14 Home Rule crisis again. Ian Paisley’s and Robert McCartney’s recent exhortations to Unionists to refuse participation in all-party talks compared Trimble to Lundy, and invoked Edward Carson, who, the article points out, “in the same hall in 1912 declared the Protestants of Ulster ready to use ‘all means which may be found necessary’ to oppose a united Ireland”.¹² In view of the terms in which the conflict has been presented, by the media, by politicians, it is perhaps unsurprising to find a breakdown in the ceasefire discussed under the headline “Ulster’s return to trench war politics”.¹³

The grounding of the Northern Ireland conflict in the First World War colours the politics of remembrance of that War (or, as is also the case, *vice versa*). “Here we go again”, Kevin Myers remarked with resignation as Remembrance Sunday approached, “[t]he incorrigible failure to understand other people’s passionately-held beliefs seasonally asserts itself”.¹⁴ Edna Longley, in her illuminating essay, “The Rising, the Somme, and Irish Memory”, points out that “[c]ommemorations are as selective as sympathies” since “[t]hey honour *our* dead, not your dead”, and argues that in Ireland, “when the Rising and the Somme came to be processed by state ideologies, the manner of their commemoration was shaped by sectarian idioms”.¹⁵ Commemoration does not

¹⁰ *Newsnight*, BBC2, U.K., 1 Feb. 1995. As discussed previously, Unionism proclaims loyalty to the Queen and the Union over and above any Parliament which might undermine that Sovereign and Union.

¹¹ *A Question of Union*, Channel 4, U.K., 1 Feb. 1995.

¹² *The Independent* 1 Oct. 1997: 9. The article, ostensibly about Paisley, carried a photograph of Carson addressing Ulstermen in 1912.

¹³ *The Guardian* 9 Dec. 1995: 4. The 1914-18 association is encouraged by other events: the IRA bombing of Thiepval barracks in 1996 for example, the names themselves connect political division with remembrance. Events at Enniskillen also reinforced the connection. See 152ff below.

¹⁴ “An Irishman’s Diary,” *Irish Times* 2 Nov. 1996: 13.

¹⁵ Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994) 69.

transcend the contemporary scene: as Longley notes, it “reinvents and reconstitutes according to present needs”.¹⁶ The condition is not peculiar to Ireland - in England and elsewhere, the form of remembering the dead has always been determined, or predetermined, by considerations other than the purely altruistic or consolatory¹⁷ - but, as her essay explores, the Irish context opens up “further theological, as well as historical, contexts”.¹⁸ The Republic of Ireland’s attitude towards the Great War has, as previously noted, been characterised by a form of cultural amnesia only recently beginning to dissipate. In the North, the problem is double-edged, consisting both of amnesia *and* zealous, if not wholly accurate, forms of remembrance, with these two attitudes operating, broadly speaking, on either side of a sectarian divide.

The Great War’s association with the Northern Irish conflict, both political and metaphorical, and the implications of the way in which the earlier war has been remembered in the North, converged and were sealed in memory on Remembrance Day in Enniskillen in 1987. An IRA bomb exploded as marchers assembled for the annual Remembrance Day ceremony at the war memorial, killing 11 people and injuring over 60 others. The bombing received more than usually widespread condemnation, and caused an almost unprecedented degree of shock.¹⁹ An emotive and emotional article by Frank McGuinness, in the *Irish Times*, was titled “We are all children of Enniskillen now”. Echoing Yeats’s “Easter 1916”, he averred that “[a]ll is changed after

¹⁶ *The Living Stream* 70.

¹⁷ Geoff Dyer notes that in England, “several of the terms by which we remember the war were established in advance of its conclusion”. *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Penguin, 1995) 7.

¹⁸ *The Living Stream* 69.

¹⁹ The Soviet Union was “unusually outspoken” about the massacre, its news agency, Tass, describing it as a “barbaric act”. The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, said that “Every civilized nation honours and respects its dead” and “[t]o take advantage of the people assembled in that way was really a desecration”. *Belfast Telegraph* 9 Nov. 1987: 4, 9. Ronald Reagan described the choice of time and place as a “cruel irony”. *Belfast Telegraph* 10 Nov. 1987: 4. The bombing was described as “the most expensive Provo own goal since ‘the troubles’ began”, and it was speculated that “[c]oming back from Enniskillen” would be “a more arduous and difficult task than even [the IRA’s] most optimistic supporters imagine”. Ed Moloney, “The Most Expensive Own Goal,” *Fortnight* (Dec. 1987): 6. The IRA later attempted to distance themselves from the bombing, claiming the British army had triggered the explosion by using a scanning device. Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993) 208.

Enniskillen”.²⁰ One reason why “Catholic Ireland was especially shocked” is, Longley suggests, “because a commemorative rite had been violated and the broken taboo, the *nefas*, was understood at a deep cultural level”. “Did even the murders at the church in Darkley”, she queries, “cause as much revulsion?”.²¹ The visual impact of the aftermath of the bombing was profoundly felt. The war memorial at Enniskillen consists of a bronze statue of a soldier, standing with head bowed, on a stone plinth; the inscription reads “Our Glorious Dead”. After the bomb, the memorial towered intact over a scene not unlike a battlefield. It was possible for even the least fanciful observers to feel that the Great War soldier was mourning the Enniskillen dead around him: past and present telescoped and reversed. “At eleven o’clock today”, someone observed, “we should have been remembering the dead. Instead, we were digging them out.”²²

Enniskillen reverberated through both North and South as a tragedy which also focused attention on the politics of remembrance, and on the division in Irish society over the events of the Great War. All the victims of the Enniskillen bombing were Protestant. At a Remembrance Day service in Northern Ireland, it was, and is, extremely improbable that they would be anything else: Enniskillen only underlined how much of a Protestant business remembering the Great War is. “Our Glorious Dead” from the two world wars, the Poppy, Remembrance Day and so on, are sentiments and symbols abjured by the Nationalist community. The IRA’s awareness of that fact made a town-centre bombing attack (theoretically a potentially random undertaking) “totally sectarian”.²³ But, equally, the very fact that this state of affairs was underlined by the attack caused more complex sentiments to surface. Jane Leonard points out that “[o]ne of the ironies of Enniskillen has been that the bombing which aimed to obliterate those remembering in a northern Irish town subsequently propelled some southern towns into

²⁰ *Irish Times* 13 Nov. 1987: 8.

²¹ *The Living Stream* 70.

²² Quoted in the *Belfast Telegraph* 9 Nov. 1987: 3.

²³ Seamus Mallon, quoted in the *Irish News* 9 Nov. 1987: 5.

a cultural and practical reclamation of their own forgotten communities".²⁴ Newspapers noted the fact that names on the Enniskillen memorial included Catholics as well as Protestants; a Franciscan monk from the Republic walked in the parade at the service in Enniskillen held on 22 November, wearing his British army ex-service medals on his cassock.²⁵ The argument over the rights or wrongs of poppy-wearing re-surfaced with a new vehemence, and with new perspectives, in the Irish press.²⁶ (The arguments still continue: Kevin Myers heralded the onset of the annual debate last year with the rather world-weary comment "the poppy is upon us again".²⁷) And a letter to the *Belfast Telegraph* by a Belfast Catholic broke Northern taboos by pointing out that "the perpetrators selected a ceremony that affects all within our community. My own family lost members in two world wars, as did many Catholic families throughout this island."²⁸

Remembrance, in some situations, relies on, and therefore creates, simplified versions of history. Thus, Nationalists in Northern Ireland have distanced themselves from a record of involvement in a war which has been taken by Unionists to symbolise loyalty to Britain; conversely, Unionists choose to forget that northern Catholics enlisted in large numbers in the 16th (Irish) Division, as they also elide the fact that the sacred cow of Protestant twentieth-century military history, the 36th (Ulster) Division, contained some Catholics. Hence the anomalous situations which can bewilder those accustomed to a less rigidly divisive set of cultural codes.²⁹ The sense of irreconcilable

²⁴ "The Twinge of Memory: Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday in Dublin since 1919," *Unionism in Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard English and Graham Walker (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996) 110.

²⁵ *Irish Independent* 23 Nov. 1987: 5.

²⁶ See Mary Holland, "Making the red poppy a symbol of division," *Irish Times* 11 Nov. 1987: 12. The letters in response to that article expressed violently opposed points of view about the appropriateness of such a symbol. *Irish Times* 14 Nov. 1987.

²⁷ "An Irishman's Diary," *Irish Times* 2 Nov. 1996: 13.

²⁸ 11 Nov. 1987: 9. The letter, unsurprisingly, is anonymous.

²⁹ The war memorial in Newry, for example, does not record the names of the "fallen", since those names are predominantly Catholic, and the Remembrance ceremonies which take place there are regarded as a largely Protestant phenomenon. I am indebted to Bernard McKeown for these details. For a detailed analysis of the problems and inconsistencies surrounding construction of war memorials in Ireland, see Jane Leonard, "'Lest We Forget': Irish War Memorials," *Ireland and the First World War*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Trinity History Workshop, 1986). Leonard also explores, and explodes certain fallacies concerning Irish involvement in, and remembrance of, the

histories is inherent in Brian Moore's description of the cenotaph in Belfast as "a white respectable phallus" (masculine, British) "planted in sinking Irish bog" (feminine, Irish), his sense of, as Anthony Bradley describes it, a "psychic landscape" which contains a "legacy of antagonism".³⁰

In some ways, the complex, often contradictory, responses to Enniskillen revealed reductive versions of history to be precisely that. They also illustrated the fact that, even as late as 1987, the Irish response to the Great War, North and South, was still a largely unopened can of worms, and that the psychic landscape of the North, for all its outward certainties and simplicities consequent upon a state of war, was inwardly one of confusion and complexity. It is that complexity which is sensed in much of Northern Ireland's literature, and which thus prevents the "Ulster Renaissance" from falling into the trap of simple antagonisms and inadequate language - both of which have characterised the political scene - that John Montague feared in the early 1970s. The best poems of the Great War, as with the "durable art" of contemporary Northern Ireland, transcend simple antithesis, articulating instead MacNeice's "world in colour". It is ironic that Bill Clinton, lauding as an example to the Northern Irish people the "melting pot" of American society, chose to quote in illustration Louis MacNeice's "Snow" with its "drunkenness of things being various", a poem which arises from the culture it was then held up to as focus for aspiration.³¹ Such a tangled state of affairs arises partly from the fact that, as Edna Longley writes, "we are witnessing the last spasms of Green and Orange state-ideologies which literature long ago found unworkable".³² Perceptions of the poetic response in Northern Ireland have not always kept pace with the poetry; the poetry is often several steps ahead of political rhetoric; forms of remembrance have been interrogated and rehabilitated in literature, (most notably in Michael Longley's recent poetry), even as the existent forms still resonate

Great War, in "The Twinge of Memory: Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday in Dublin since 1919," *Unionism in Modern Ireland* 99-114.

³⁰ "Literature and Culture in the North of Ireland," *Cultural Contexts and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988) 45.

³¹ *The Guardian* 1 Dec. 1995: 4.

³² Edna Longley, "Opening Up: a new pluralism," *Fortnight* (Nov. 1987): 25.

politically in ways which the poetry undermines. In some ways, the art of war stands in opposition to Goldring's description, quoted earlier, of war itself: if war is the "great simplifier", art, in contrast, complicates; it does not stand for one of two sides, or exclude anything unrelated to a particular political position; it does not win or lose, or even concede validity to that terminology; it manifests, at times, an oasis of uncertainties. Cultural development, in other words, has not toed the commemorative line in Northern Ireland, even though poetry itself, in a different way, in Michael Longley's words "commemorates...remembers and honours".³³

Edna Longley argues forcefully in her criticism for recognition of the diversity of the Irish experience, rather than adherence to "unworkable" ideologies, and for the role played by literature, particularly Northern Irish literature, in enabling that recognition: "poetic diversity" is, she argues, "a frail silver lining of communal division".³⁴ She is also acutely sensitive to the fact that the Troubles can lead to "improper expectations" of Northern poets through the exertion of pressure to subscribe in poetry to a particular political cause, as they can also inadvertently encourage reductive misreadings of the poetry, or of the nature of poetry, itself.³⁵ In this sense, the connection she formulates in *Poetry in the Wars* between the First World War poets and Northern Irish poets is especially pertinent: Wilfred Owen's poetry, for example, honours and remembers the dead of the Great War with fidelity to the imagination rather than to popular expectation. It is also, as John Montague's speculations in the early 1970s illustrate - "...the final judgement on the new Ulster Renaissance may well depend on their ability to learn a style from despair: it is the last quarter of the twentieth century we are entering, not the Georgian first"³⁶ - a connection sensed by Northern Irish poets themselves, one which Edna Longley uncovers rather than creates. Longley, Heaney and Mahon all explore, in different ways, their relationship to Great War precursors.

³³ Interview with the author, 11 July 1996.

³⁴ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 16.

³⁵ See "Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland," *Poetry in the Wars* 185-210.

³⁶ Quoted in Robert Buttel, *Seamus Heaney* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP; London: Associated University Presses, 1975) 69.

One reason may be the sense articulated by Mahon that, as with the Great War, “[t]he poetry and the ‘troubles’ had a common source; the same energy gave rise to both”.³⁷ To acknowledge the link between art and violence means also to experience the temptation and pressure to compromise the former in the face of the overwhelming immediacy of the latter, a pressure which the best of the Great War soldier poets resisted. Another may be the unusually long “period of inhibition” in the North “before proper confrontation with the realities of the Great War”³⁸: Northern poets deconsecrate rhetoric in a way which apparently could not have been undertaken fifty years earlier, and to some extent find a model for that process in English poetry of the First World War.

II.

But comparisons between contemporary Northern Irish poetry and First World War poetry can, misinterpreted, be as damaging as revealing. Perceptions of Northern Irish poets as “neo-Georgians” may be problematical depending on whether “Georgian” is seen as a derogatory or complimentary term. Wilfred Owen’s association with Georgianism, his sense that “[f]ame is the recognition of one’s peers”,³⁹ by whom he meant those included in Marsh’s Georgian poetry anthologies, should rehabilitate it, as should the work of, amongst others, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, and Edmund Blunden; the prominence of Rupert Brooke among the pre-war Georgians, and his notoriously idealistic response to war in the 1914 sonnets, undermines that rehabilitation, as does the complacent Anglo-centricity and “pedestrian tendency” in “much run-of-the-mill Georgian poetry”.⁴⁰ Montague’s sense of a link between the first

³⁷ Interview, by William Scammell, *Poetry Review* 81.2 (Summer 1991): 5.

³⁸ Philip Orr, *The Road to the Somme: Men of the Ulster Division Tell their Story* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987) 227.

³⁹ Wilfred Owen, “To Susan Owen,” 25 May 1918, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: OUP, 1967) 553.

⁴⁰ James Reeves, introduction, *Georgian Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1962): xvii. Reeves also notes, however, that “[a]ll periods have their recipe poems; those of today are no better and no worse than those of the twenties; only they are more acceptable to contemporary readers” xvii. His introduction provides a useful overview of the chequered history of the term “Georgianism”, ranging from descriptive to one of “critical abuse” xi.

and last quarters of the century verges on the critical-prescriptive: to survive, Northern Irish poets will have to come up with something “new”.⁴¹ In contrast, Mahon more perceptively notes that the Northern “renaissance” is inherently something new which, far from floundering in a timewarp, is in some ways moving the rest of Ireland forwards:

Not having been in the [Second World] war shunted Ireland to the sidelines, and I think she’s been forced back into the twentieth century by events in the North, by the forgotten North. The nastiness reared its head as it had to sooner or later; the poet from the North had a new thing to say, a new kind of sound to make, a new texture to create. Looking back on it, there’s a sort of inevitability that the new energy should have come from the North.⁴²

In spite of this assertion, the attribution of “neo-Georgianism” to Mahon, Longley and Heaney has, on the whole, carried a negative charge because it takes Edna Longley’s “improper expectations” as acceptable criteria from which to pass judgement.⁴³ Equally, the state ideologies which persist North and South have influenced, or damaged, recognition of a process of rhetorical subversion and “deconsecration of Irish memory”,⁴⁴ if not the process itself.

Hence, Heaney’s engagements with the poetry of the Great War, and with the politics of remembrance in Northern Ireland, are underrated because of his place in an imaginative tradition, closely allied to a political tradition, that sometimes eschews association with English history and culture. Conversely, for Mahon and Longley, if remembrance of the Great War, notably the Battle of the Somme, has been dominated by Protestant, or Unionist culture in Northern Ireland, that dominance has had a longer-term, primarily negative effect on perceptions of Protestantism’s cultural development. The Battle of the Somme has been widely perceived as the result of a failure in

⁴¹ Echoes of Ezra Pound here, and the rather too easy view that Modernism was a “new” reaction against an archaic Georgianism, eliding the fact that Georgianism was itself “new” in its reaction against certain aspects of Victorianism, and that certain Georgian poets, notably Owen, had a profound effect on the Modernist movement. One “style” does not out-date another in a linear progression response to historical circumstances. Reeves complains that “so complete has the revolution been” in rejecting the Georgian movement that the “positive merits” of the poetry are forgotten. Introduction, *Georgian Poetry* xviii.

⁴² “An Interview with Derek Mahon,” by Terence Brown, *Poetry Ireland Review* 14 (Autumn 1985): 12-13.

⁴³ See Ch. 6, 183-84 and Ch. 7, 225-26 below.

⁴⁴ Edna Longley, *The Living Stream* 85.

imagination: it was, unlike other disasters, unforeseen, unimaginative in tactics, and retrospectively unimaginable in its horror. Its military leader, Douglas Haig, has also become, in some respects, a symbol of that imaginative failure: “there was”, Paul Fussell suggests, “a hopeless absence of cleverness about the whole thing, entirely characteristic of its author”. Of relevance to the battle’s disastrous outcome were, he also hints, Haig’s “want of imagination and innocence of artistic culture”.⁴⁵ For Modris Eksteins, as for others, Haig is a man “whose entire life and demeanor were the epitome of middle-class values and ambitions. Dour, religious, dedicated, hard-working, emotionally repressed, and yet a model of honor, achievement, and respectability, he is a symbol of an age...And yet he also represents the tragedy of an age.”⁴⁶ The epithets which crop up time and time again in relation to Haig - usually with wholly negative connotations - leave the impression of a fiercely Protestant, unimaginative, incompetent, rather bovine and, from a post-war perspective at least, anachronistic leader: Fussell describes him as, “stubborn, self-righteous, inflexible, intolerant... humorless”.⁴⁷

In both Eksteins’s and Fussell’s critiques of the way in which Haig fought the war, a connection is implied between his faith and his failures. His Church of Scotland background, by implication, was not conducive to the imaginative forethought that could, hypothetically, have saved lives on 1 July 1916. Haig himself, in 1919, described the driving force behind his own activities as chief of the British general staff in the Great War, and behind the “courage” and “resolve” of all those involved as “the conviction that we were fighting, not only for ourselves and for our own Empire, but for a world ideal in which God was with us”.⁴⁸ The evangelical impulse behind involvement in the Great War is perhaps as obvious as it is now often unspoken: the King, as Defender of the Faith, in fighting an Imperial war, must also be fighting a religious war. The war, Eksteins suggests, was a war of righteousness: “To kill

⁴⁵ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 12-13.

⁴⁶ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, 1989 (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1990) 187.

⁴⁷ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 12.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* 191.

Germans was to purge the world of the Antichrist, the great beast from the abyss, and to herald the New Jerusalem....Not since the wars of religion of the seventeenth century, and perhaps even the crusades, had men of the cloth encouraged killing for the greater glory of God with such enthusiasm.”⁴⁹ And the Great War was also, evidence from both England and Germany suggests, a war which initially appealed to Protestants rather more than to Catholics, because of their closer identification with the national cause (without any distraction from Rome), and the perception that the Protestant church was ultimately the handmaiden of the state.

That evangelical impulse was subjected very quickly to ironic mockery: the trench newspaper, *The Wipers Times*, was renamed in April 1916 *The “New Church” Times*, and with subversive humour proclaimed in its editorial “Oh! Ye of little faith, wake up and smile for the summer is upon ye. Let your step be brisk and your hearts light for ‘even as ye have sown so shall ye not reap’, and for that thank your lucky stars, for though ye have tried for eighteen months to lose the war yet have ye not succeeded and victory is at hand. So go ye unto the uttermost ends of darkness, yea, even unto Piccadilly and Westminster, and preach the gospel of cheeriness and hope”.⁵⁰ The soldier in the trenches identified with the crucified Christ, rather than with the crusader killing on behalf of that Christ, as much of the disturbing religious imagery in Owen’s poetry, and some of the popular war myths - the crucified Canadian, the angels at Mons - suggest. The identification, however, served to weaken rather than strengthen ties with the Church (and through the church, the state). The soldier was perhaps Christian with his burden, reaching no Celestial City but a landscape of horror and desolation. Fussell, in arguing that the movement in the Great War was towards, rather than away from, myth, points out that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is a frequent imaginative touchstone for the soldier. “Protestant England” looks not to Dante for “images of waste and horror” but to Bunyan.⁵¹ But the fundamental difference between the soldier and

⁴⁹ *Rites of Spring* 236.

⁵⁰ *The Wipers Times*, intro. Patrick Beaver (London: Peter Davis, 1973) 51-2. First published on the Western Front in newspaper form 1916-18.

⁵¹ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 139f.

Christian was the latter's purposeful movement through time and space, and the former's stagnation in hostile country. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, it seems, provided the metaphors of darkness, but not of light, the trials of the pilgrim without any of the progress, and no Celestial City awaiting at the end, not even the homes for heroes that had been promised. So to many of the combatants at least, the blaze of glory experienced by the war-mongering religious maniac burnt itself out in the face of a barbaric conflict that appeared to be a denial of God's existence, as much as it was a denial of history, progress and Western Christianity.⁵² Haig, and the religious views which sustained him, were, one might infer, anachronistic even before the war was over. As Fussell puts it, after the events of 1916, "[w]hat could remain of confidence in Divine assistance...".⁵³

Anachronistic, intolerant, unimaginative, stubborn, repressed - these adjectives are also prevalent in descriptions of the Ulster Protestant community. Haig is perhaps the whipping boy for the sins of an imperial age forced to reinterpret aspects of its cultural identity in the trenches. He seems at times almost like the archetypal honest Ulsterman, whose 1912 Covenant was signed "[i]n sure confidence that God will defend the right...", but who found in the post-war years that the tide of sympathy had turned against him. But Fussell's question "what could remain of confidence..." does still find an answer of sorts (though not the one he would anticipate) in Ulster. Haig's 1919 speech is, one might think, the kind of speech which could never be made again with conviction or without irony: English militant Protestantism was probably in its death-throes even before that speech was delivered. But, on the other hand, Ian Paisley can still proclaim that the "spirit" of 1788 "rested on a religious faith which eschews priestcraft and is begotten by faith in 'the perfect law of liberty' the Holy Bible" and hope that "that spirit will be re-born in the hearts of Ulster Loyalists today" who will

⁵² In his introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London: Faber, 1986), Tom Paulin, in his discussion of seventeenth century poetry, points out that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was, in E.P. Thompson's phrase, one of the "foundation texts of the English working-class movement". He also notes, however, in implied contrast to England, that Bunyan "remains a powerful influence within Protestant populism in the north of Ireland" 37.

⁵³ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 29.

not only “commemorate that faith but participate therein” and hurl “defiance at the enemies”.⁵⁴ If the war ironised the militant streak in English Protestantism, for various reasons it did not do so in Ulster Protestantism.

Perceptions of the role of the imagination in the Great War have helped to form negative perceptions of the Ulster Protestant imagination (or rather a perceived absence of any such thing) in the twentieth century. To oppose the unimaginative, representative Imperial figure of Haig is to make a (metaphorical) stand for fluidity, tolerance, imaginative power and modernity. The Ulster Protestant community’s “failure” to do so implies that it is also, like Haig, representative of the tragedy of an age. There is unquestionably a response to the Great War which is, according to unwritten rules of the modern age, perceived to be correct, a response based on an ironic self-awareness and a cultural reflexiveness inconceivable before 1914. The absence of such a response in Ulster still invites the criticism of which the following by Geoffrey Bell is characteristic:

Right they [the Protestant workers] are to remind the English ruling class that over 5,000 Ulster working-class Protestants died [*sic*⁵⁵] in the Battle of the Somme so that Britain could gain a few more inches of land. The anniversary of that battle is another occasion when Orangemen march through the towns of Northern Ireland, quoting the words of Sir William Spencer [*sic*]: “I am not an Ulsterman but yesterday the 1st of July as I followed their amazing attack on the Somme I felt I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world.”....They quote the words not with anger at the senseless carnage, at the way they were sacrificed so that well-fed, high-living Englishmen could enjoy themselves for a few more years. They are not bitter at the slaughter of their own people in one of the most pointless military battles the world has ever seen, a battle judged necessary at the time by those not of their class, not of their country. They are not angry, they are not bitter, they do not protest; they are proud.

That is their tragedy.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Foreword, *Their Cry Was “No Surrender”*, by Peter Robinson (Belfast: Crown Publications, 1988) 14. The book is dedicated “to all those whose answer to Ulster’s enemies is still ‘No Surrender’” 3.

⁵⁵ Although the Ulster Division casualties on 1st July 1916 numbered in excess of 5000, the number actually killed on that day was approximately 2000.

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Bell, *The Protestants of Ulster* (London: Pluto Press, 1976) 144.

Ulster Protestant pride, in this context, is symptomatic of a failure in understanding, of imprisonment within a mindset that the war itself should, theoretically, have invalidated. And in failing to recognise, in Bell's terms, the real source of their "tragedy", then by implication Ulster Protestants have (typically) failed to recognise the imaginative potential of their own situation.

The 1920s in England were characterised by an apparent reaction against what can be loosely defined as "repression". One could go further and claim that such a reaction has remained characteristic of twentieth-century culture. But for Eksteins, the desire not to think about the war was itself an "act of repression...of one of the most consequential events of the age" which "called forth the very opposite: the denial of repression",⁵⁷ the results of which were hedonism, narcissism, materialism, extravagance, the frenetic dance of the decade, and no mention of the fact that society was still rather short of men. That counter act of repression, living for the moment, is apparently broken with the flood of war books, films, memoirs, and poems at the end of the decade, from which time the war is, theoretically, not only commemorated but remembered.

While the 1920s reaction against traditional values and authority was taking place (or at least appeared to be taking place) in England, Ulster Protestants were enshrining those values in a Protestant "statelet" of Northern Ireland, re-establishing rather than subverting authority. The extent to which the two cultures developed differently while retaining strong links, is painfully apparent today: in 1912, many Englishmen, sharing the Ulster Protestant value system, were outraged by the possibility that Ulster Protestantism could be betrayed by the liberal government of the time, prompting, for example, the passionate response of Rudyard Kipling in "Ulster 1912". By 1996, Ulster Protestants were perceived as bigoted and intransigent.⁵⁸ The Great

⁵⁷ *Rites of Spring* 256.

⁵⁸ See for example popular opinion expressed in letters to the *Guardian* on 12 Feb. 1996 after the Canary Wharf bombing: "The people of London are not prepared to carry the burden of unionist intransigence any longer...We owe the bigots of Northern Ireland nothing"; "Is not the existence of Northern Ireland a denial of democracy?"; "the loyalist community...must either integrate with a united Ireland, or leave"; "Like Hong Kong, the province cannot remain a crown colony forever".

War might be, as Eksteins claims, “the axis on which the modern world turned”,⁵⁹ but not everyone turned the same way. The notion of Protestantism as some kind of essential and self-defining feature, partially outweighing class differences and replacing national loyalties, survives in Ulster in a way it does not in England. As David Miller points out, although Belfast and the north-east corner of Ireland modernised simultaneously with mainland Britain, “Orangeism sustained within this modernising society...the core of a community which cut across social classes, in which all were in some sense equal in their common Protestantism”.⁶⁰

From one point of view, partly arising from the Great War, the link between Ulster’s evangelical Protestantism and modernisation becomes paradoxical if not untenable. George Bernard Shaw claimed, during the Home Rule debate, that Ireland had been “kept out of the mighty stream of modern Protestantism by her preoccupation with her unnatural political condition”.⁶¹ The Ulster Protestant community is, from such a perspective, a community which turns inwards upon itself, embodying all the more repressive aspects of Calvinist culture. In a way, the Ulster Protestant reaction to the Great War was to affirm those aspects in spite of (because of?) the disintegration of founding principles outside the community - the idea of empire, the union, the Protestant ethic itself. So if Calvinist cultures have always had a problematic relation to the arts, that problem was compounded in Ulster with a war that appeared to make a mockery of the “Haig-like” qualities which formed the basis of the Protestant ethic. The “non-Protestant” imagination is, in a way, vindicated by the battle of the Somme, because of the battle’s disastrous outcome. “Method, order, system” - the factors which should have been “the key to success”⁶² - led to an unimaginable horror. But, paradoxically, the ability to see the Great War’s horror as unimaginable, is also to move

⁵⁹ *Rites of Spring* 237.

⁶⁰ David Miller, *Queen’s Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 64.

⁶¹ Quoted in *Across a Roaring Hill*, ed. Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1985) 61.

⁶² See Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* 188.

beyond the narrow perspective of method and system to a point where imaginative paralysis begins to be defeated.

Terence Brown writes that the modern Ulster Unionist identity, forged between 1886 and the Great War, was “an identity which subsumed manifold differences within northern protestant society in a fundamental, all-embracing opposition to the proposed constitutional change”.⁶³ Contempt from other (most notably Irish Literary Revival) quarters for the Ulster Protestant imagination does not pre-date this identity. Perhaps the most famous critique is AE’s: “Ulster will not be able to express its soul or its Irish character so long as it looks to Great Britain for its cultural ideals. Unionism in Ireland has produced no literature.”⁶⁴ The unionism referred to here is the imperial unionist consciousness developed around the time of the first Home Rule crisis, a unionism characterised by excessive propaganda and chronic Anglophilia. Between 1912 and 1914, the popular images of Ulster Protestantism, as they still appear, were consolidated. As Alvin Jackson explains, at the time of the third Home Rule Bill, “unionist imagery was...both more influential than at any time in the past, as well as being further removed from the British patriotic imagery which had been an early inspiration within the movement”.⁶⁵ It is also, at least from an external viewpoint, an identity which fits rather too well with the Weberian view of Protestantism,⁶⁶ but to which the substantially revised version of Weber’s thesis, emphasising Protestantism’s transformative capacity and revolutionary potential in relation to the modern world, rather than its (dubious) connection with capitalism, is seldom applied.

⁶³ Terence Brown, *The Whole Protestant Community: the making of a historical myth*, Field Day Pamphlet No. 7 (Derry: Field Day, 1985) 10.

⁶⁴ Quoted in *Across a Roaring Hill* iii. Echoing A.E.’s sentiments, though with an element of humorous parody, George Birmingham, in his 1912 novel, *The Red Hand of Ulster*, writes “Belfast...has not given to the world many eminent poets, philosophers or scholars...But it has given birth to several mathematicians of quite respectable standing.” (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1912) 14.

⁶⁵ “Irish Unionist Imagery 1850-1920,” *Returning to Ourselves: Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School*, ed. Eve Patten (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995) 354.

⁶⁶ As expressed in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1930 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1976). Cf. Sean O’Faolain’s comment that “Orangeism has never yet been associated with anything that did not pay” quoted in Clare O’Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) 47.

Unionism is, as O'Halloran explores in *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism*, often stereotyped by an Irish nationalist viewpoint, but equally importantly it is also a self-stereotype, and one that appears to have cornered itself, artistically speaking, after the First World War. Weber's conception of the Protestant ethic features in both negative perceptions and positive self-perceptions of Ulster Protestantism. From either (limited) point of view, the imagination may be a casualty of political expediency. Traditionally, the relation of Protestantism, more specifically Calvinism, to the arts has been seen as one of (mutual) suspicion.⁶⁷ Weber suggests that the "entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture" stems from the fact that these elements are "of no use toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions".⁶⁸ More recent viewpoints are that "Protestantism, as a religion of the word, has had a 'mixed' record when it comes to the arts", and that it has been "uneasy about objectification of the divine drama in images which might themselves draw the devotion of the suppliant from the invisible God beyond the gods. It has often and maybe even usually been uneasy about unrestricted bodily attention, and has rather consistently feared the ecstasy of the dance through most of the years of its history."⁶⁹

The common denominator in the various views of Protestantism is the sense that it is driven by fear, and it is the idea of Protestantism as a religion of fear which survives to an unusual degree in Ulster. Vaslav Nijinsky's famous response to the Great War - his announcement at a private performance in 1919, "Now I will dance you the war, with its suffering, with its destruction, with its death"⁷⁰ - is a gesture towards the arrival of a modern age made on the edge of insanity. The gesture stands in opposition to the

⁶⁷ One of George Birmingham's characters in *The Red Hand of Ulster*, Mr Cahoon, is a Belfast business man who gives all his spare time to "good works", and therefore has no time for reading and culture. "I have no doubt", he writes, "that he would have brushed the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant into the world's waste-paper basket with his unvarying formula: It wouldn't do in Belfast. They are business men there." 73-74.

⁶⁸ *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 105.

⁶⁹ See Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3rd ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994) 1198.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky*, 1933 (London: Sphere Books, 1970) 337.

stereotypical unionist sensibility: both might be informed by apocalypse, but seek relief in fundamentally different ways. Michael Walzer writes of the early Puritans:

Like Hobbes, they saw disorder and war as the natural state of fallen men, out of which they had been drawn by God's command and by the painful efforts of their own regenerate wills. But they lived always on the very brink of chaos, maintaining their position only through a constant vigilance and, indeed, a constant warfare against their own natural inclination and against the devil and his worldlings. The goal of this warfare was repression, and its apparent cause was an extraordinary anxiety....In Puritan literature this same fearfulness is made specific in social terms. Once again, it is a fear which Hobbes would understand: the fear of disorder in society. It is apparent in the nervous hostility with which Puritan writers regarded carousal, vagabondage, idleness, all forms of individualistic extravagance...country dances and urban crowds, the theater with its gay (undisciplined) audiences, gossip, witty talk...the list could be extended.⁷¹

Ulster Protestantism, rather than embracing chaos in the spirit of the 1920s, dealt with it by a resistance which translated as repression. Walzer's description of the early Puritans still echoes in some aspects of Ulster Presbyterianism: the loyalist slogan "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance" is symptomatic of this mentality. The fear, in 1918, was still the fear of the "wild Irish" at the gates, threatening the union, threatening stability, a danger which became all the more immediate as Ireland dissolved into civil war in the early 1920s. The oft-cited "siege mentality" of Ulster unionists could be said to have its roots in Calvinism - "whithersoever you turn, all the objects around you are not only unworthy of your confidence, but almost openly menace you, and seem to threaten immediate death"⁷² - and characterised their reaction at the end of the Great War (as it also, to some extent, characterised the reaction to the 1994 ceasefire). If political necessity dictated (and dictates) remembrance of history in one way as opposed to another, as it does also in England, art could be feared because of its "power to penetrate communal neurosis",⁷³ the existence of which, in the interests of security, has not been openly acknowledged. From this angle, perhaps the Ulster and English ways of

⁷¹ Michael Walzer, "Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology," *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization: A Comparative View*, ed. S.N.Eisenstadt (New York and London: Basic Books Inc., 1968) 120-22.

⁷² John Calvin, quoted in Walzer, "Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology," *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization* 121.

⁷³ Longley and Dawe, Introduction, *Across a Roaring Hill* ix.

coming to terms with the Great War stem from the same source, one resulting in an explosion of art, decadence, uninhibited behaviour, and the other in an implosive rejection of instability, emotion and generational conflict.

In neither case, of course, is this the whole story, but it is the latter perception of Ulster Protestant ideology which provides the basis for Frank McGuinness's influential play, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*,⁷⁴ and it is the supposed moral highground which comes with a conscious awareness of the possibility of reading history in an infinite number of ways that enables certain critiques of Ulster Protestant bigotry (although the sense of moral highground undermines any such awareness). *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is a play more than usually bound up with the question of reception. It attempts to contextualise the artistic silence characteristic of Ulster Protestantism in the war and post-war period by focusing on unionist culture in a way which is both sympathetic and transgressive. It also records, on another level, the death of the artist (Kenneth Pyper), even though the "artist" in the play is the only survivor. The play does not, despite its reception, break the apparent silence of Ulster Protestantism on the subject of the Great War: on the contrary, the play's effect depends upon that silence's continuance, or rather on a belief in its continuance. Perhaps, therefore, one should be wary of claiming, as has often been the case, that McGuinness has given a voice to the voiceless in his dramatisation of what John Wilson Foster calls an "archetypal event in loyalist psycho-history".⁷⁵ The play offers a version of events, a way of understanding, that both conforms with and subverts some of the stereotypes of the Ulster Protestant, turning the silence into an imaginary event by working in the space between loyalist rhetoric and the actuality of human suffering. The dance metaphor which opens and closes the play works on several obvious fronts - war, love, politics (Carson's dance) - but there is also some irony in the choice of metaphor to give shape to past and present because of Protestantism's suspicion of the

⁷⁴ (London: Faber, 1986)

⁷⁵ "Imagining the Titanic," *Returning to Ourselves*, ed. Eve Patten, 334.

dance: the elder Pyper invites his younger self into the dance unto death reminiscent of Nijinsky more than of post-war Ulster:

Ulster lies in rubble at our feet. Save it. Save me. Take me out of this war alive. Evil is come upon us. The temple of the Lord is darkness. He has ransacked his dwelling. The Protestant gods die....Dance in the deserted temple of the Lord. Dance unto death before the Lord.⁷⁶

The problematic of the Protestant imagination is as much one of perception as it is anything else. *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, it appears, was something which many people felt *should* exist in the Irish canon: the play was greeted, Joe McMinn suggests, with “delight and relief - as if, finally, a tradition not associated with imagination or poetry was getting a chance to be heard with respect”.⁷⁷ Behind this reaction, there is a sense that the following assumption still holds: McGuinness has done for the Ulster Protestants what they could not (cannot) do for themselves - critique their own historical myths. Such an assumption is misleading,⁷⁸ and might explain why the *Irish Times* reviewer of the play called it “one of the most comprehensive attacks ever made in the theatre on Ulster Protestantism”.⁷⁹

The play is rather, as Michael Longley describes it, a “humane study of cultural confusion and military heroism”.⁸⁰ But one of the problems with the play is the temptation to read it as more than it can possibly be: it invites its audience, even in its title, to stand back and watch history, in contrast to Derek Mahon’s “watch me as I make history” (“Rage for Order”). To be able to “Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching” implies a revelation of what is already there, the unfolding of the destiny of a community, when in fact the play also meditates as much on its own “community” as on the one whose history it is apparently retelling. The “Somme” in the title can symbolise

⁷⁶ *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* 12.

⁷⁷ Joe McMinn, “Language, Literature and Cultural Identity: Irish and Anglo-Irish,” *Styles of Belonging: The Cultural Identities of Ulster*, ed. Jean Lundy and Aodán Mac Póilin (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1992) 48.

⁷⁸ Unless MacNeice, Mahon, Rodgers, Longley and others are to be considered as self-expelled from their Protestant background, which entails a view of “Protestant” culture as less than the sum of its parts.

⁷⁹ 19 Feb. 1985: 10.

⁸⁰ Letter to the *Irish Times* 2 Mar. 1985: 23.

more than the battle itself: the sons of Ulster are marching towards doom, sterility, political stagnation, attrition, the deserted temple (of Ulster) at the play's close. One can, it might be inferred, watch them marching towards a (metaphorical) Somme even now.

III.

If the Somme can be appropriated as a symbol of the Ulster Protestant "fate", so too can that other "archetypal event in loyalist psycho-history", the sinking of RMS *Titanic* on 15th April 1912. Both events hold a more complex place in memory than remembrance might suggest. A recent documentary on the *Titanic*'s sister ship, the *Britannic*, showed footage of Belfast's Harland and Wolff shipyard at the height of its success, building the White Star liners *Olympic*, *Titanic*, *Britannic*, and so on. The footage was contrasted with pictures of the shipyard today, a forlorn sight of vast empty space, bleak and abandoned, with grass growing through the concrete.⁸¹ The contrast has, if one chooses to interpret it that way, enormous symbolic potential: nature beginning to dominate a once industrial, man-controlled environment; the fate of the yard uncannily paralleling the fate of the ships it built; the end of the Victorian and pre-dating that, Enlightenment, dream; the decline of Ulster Protestant political and economic power; the disappearance, literally, of large numbers of people from the face of the earth - the workers from the yard, the passengers from the ships, the soldiers in the Great War.

The temptation to read such symbolism into Belfast's association with the *Titanic*, and all the ship has come to represent in the modern imagination, is, because of the peculiar political position of Ulster Protestants, almost irresistible. The purpose here is not to challenge the *Titanic* myth itself as it is known throughout the Western world: unlike other more serious disasters, which capture interest only briefly, the huge interest in the *Titanic*'s disastrous maiden voyage has persisted throughout the century, suggesting that in the popular imagination, more than a ship was sunk in April 1912. It

⁸¹ *Encounters*, Channel 4, U.K., 5 May 1996.

has acquired a significance out of all proportion either to the scale of the disaster, or to its economic and political effect on the British Empire. “[N]othing in the whole war moved me so deeply as the loss of the *Titanic* had done a few years earlier”, George Orwell wrote. “This comparatively petty disaster shocked the whole world, and the shock has not quite died away even yet.”⁸² The loss of the *Titanic*, Jeremy Hawthorn writes, “offered itself as a perfect symbol for a variety of things: over-confidence and complacency, the end of an era, a presage for the collapse of British invincibility and of the changes that would be wrought by the First World War”.⁸³

The existence of such a belief in the *Titanic*’s significance on a broad cultural scale has to be considered as a backdrop to its more specific place in Ulster’s historical myths. But in Belfast, the *Titanic* is a crucial symbol *for* and *of* the loyalist community: it is also, therefore, in view of the world-wide symbolic value it carries, a problematising force in various perceptions of Ulster Protestantism’s character and history. Three days before the *Titanic* sank, the third Home Rule Bill was introduced into the House of Commons for a first reading. Against all the odds, the Bill never became law in the north-east of Ireland. Had it done so in the late nineteenth century, Harland and Wolff intended withdrawing the shipbuilding works from Belfast to mainland Britain, because there could be no “security” or “commercial confidence” under an Irish Parliament.⁸⁴ The shipbuilding itself, then, may be more than a symbol: it is, or was (for the Protestant worker employed there), a tangible manifestation of the virtues of the union. But while unionism might identify itself, and be identified with, the *Titanic*, to state the obvious, the *Titanic* foundered in 1912 and Ulster Unionism did not. If one can connect the *Titanic*, the Somme, and Northern Ireland, the ways in which such associations are made are symptomatic of ideological positions that conflict with, or create an idea of, the past and present condition of Ulster Protestantism. Thus, if the sinking of the ship

⁸² George Orwell, “My Country Right or Left,” 1940, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1970) 587.

⁸³ Jeremy Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate* (London: Arnold, 1996) 88.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* 404-5.

represents the end of Victorian complacency, and the Great War merely puts the rubber stamp on that end, Ulster Unionism, by implication, should have foundered with the ship, but instead survives as an anachronistic symbol of a sunken culture. On the other hand, if the loss of the *Titanic* was an enormous blow to Ulster Protestant pride,⁸⁵ one from which, A.T.Q. Stewart suggests, Belfast “has never quite recovered”,⁸⁶ it is also true that large numbers of Irish Catholics went down with the ship, and that Irish Catholic suffering at Protestant hands extended beyond the Government of Ireland Act. The *Titanic* and the Somme are, in many ways, devastating events in loyalist history, but one could also argue that they were events which saved Ulster from Home Rule by what Foster terms “historical default”: the apocalyptic sensibility characteristic of Presbyterianism lives in anticipation of such disasters, even finds its approach to everyday life vindicated by them. Alternatively, the loss of the *Titanic* could be seen as retribution for the appalling anti-Catholic sectarianism of the shipyard: Protestant supremacy goes down with its ship.

Stephen Kern connects the outbreak of war with the sinking of the *Titanic*, and attributes both to the failure of the old order:

The arrogance, the lack of safety precautions, the reliance on technology, the simultaneity of events, the worldwide attention, the loss of life, all evoke the sinking of the *Titanic* as a simile for the outbreak of the war. The lookouts on the *Titanic* were blinded by fog, as the political leaders and diplomats and military men were blinded by historical shortsightedness, convinced that even if war came it would not last long. On the eve of the disaster they shared a confidence that the basic structure of European states was sound, able to weather any storm. Europe, they were certain, was unsinkable. The concentration of wireless messages from the sinking ship...suggests the flurry of telegraph messages and telephone conversations exchanged during the July Crisis. Even the icebergs floating in the path of

⁸⁵ St John Ervine, in his novel *Changing Winds* 1917 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), explores the reasons why the loss of the *Titanic* had such an enormous impact: “The sinking of the great ship had stunned men’s minds and humiliated their pride.... ‘It isn’t true,’ he kept on saying to himself... ‘She’s a Belfast boat and Belfast boats don’t go down....’ He felt it oddly this loss.... It was not the drowning of a crowd of people or the drowning of Tom Arthurs that most affected Henry. It was the fact that a boat built by Belfast men had foundered on her maiden trip, on a clear cold night of stars, reeling from the iceberg’s blow like a flimsy yacht. He had the Ulsterman’s pride in the Ulsterman’s power... ‘By God,’ he said to himself, ‘this’ll break their hearts in Belfast!’” 337-38.

⁸⁶ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis* (London: Faber, 1967) 45.

the liner had an analog in the eight assassins who lay in wait for Francis Ferdinand at various points on his parade route the day he was murdered.⁸⁷

John Wilson Foster proposes instead that:

like the Somme, the loss of the *Titanic* has come to symbolise unconsciously the thwarted nationhood of Ulster Protestants, that at the level of community dreamwork, the foundering of the ship and the founding of Northern Ireland were intertwined, that the ship *became* Northern Ireland, a statelet that invited the pride in which it was fashioned, but was always in danger of being sunk by the chilling impersonal 'iceberg dynamics' of Irish nationalism.⁸⁸

It is a long way, conceptually, from Sarajevo to Stormont, or indeed from iceberg to terrorist (which does seem to be the common denominator in these two analogies). As Hawthorn points out, something about the *Titanic* disaster "encourages such searches for minutely differentiated symbolic clues, as if the *Titanic*'s loss were a highly coded Renaissance painting or piece of medieval church architecture".⁸⁹ But in the midst of these heady similes lurks a sensitive cultural issue: the modernity which for Foster was being enacted in Belfast in the building of the *Titanic*, and the modernity that brought about changing perceptions of space and time for Kern, can have both positive and negative connotations. In Ulster, negativity has tended to dominate attitudes.⁹⁰ The modernity which brought about the *Titanic* ("God Himself could not sink this ship") was also part of the attempted scientific domination of nature that enabled, but was travestied by, the First World War, when machines dominating nature altered to machines dominating man (nature) at appallingly high cost to human life. With such a view now commonplace, pride in the *Titanic* is, for Ulster Protestants, as problematic in the post-war years as pride in their achievements at the Somme. The tide of opinion

⁸⁷ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983) 268-9.

⁸⁸ "Imagining the *Titanic*" 333.

⁸⁹ *Cunning Passages* 108.

⁹⁰ In Mary Costello's *Titanic Town: Memoirs of a Belfast Girlhood* (London: Mandarin, 1993), the *Titanic* does not represent a modernising project. The title of the book links Belfast with disaster: the city, like the ship, is "ill-fated" (26). It also expresses her sense of marginalisation in a Protestant city, a point reinforced by the nature of *Titanic* "mythology" in Northern Ireland (the serial number of the ship was, if held up to a mirror, supposed to read "NO POPE" etc.).

turned against any such emotion: in the modern and modernising world, the *Titanic* points the dangers of hubris; the Somme is the final tragedy.

John Wilson Foster, in “Imagining the *Titanic*”, points beyond sectarianism to the modernising achievements of Belfast, and thus tries to rehabilitate the *Titanic* in its Ulster Protestant context: whatever one’s reading of modernity, the city does at least, he claims, require a more sophisticated cultural analysis than it has yet received. Like Hawthorn, he also concentrates on the ways in which the *Titanic* was imagined before and after the disaster actually happened, and, more particularly, on the imaginative response to the event in Ireland. There is a (possibly deliberate) ambiguity about Foster’s title, “Imagining the *Titanic*”. He is referring to the fact that the *Titanic*’s fate was, unlike the war which followed it, eerily imagined in various fictional works before the ship was even built, but he is also perhaps implicitly saying something about his own imaginative potential as an East Belfast Protestant within a community which, so the stereotype goes, while it might have been capable of *building* the *Titanic*, certainly could not have “imagined” it.⁹¹

Hawthorn, when he considers the “Irish Connection” of the *Titanic*, never really lifts the debate beyond the Orange/Green fault-lines that for Foster have prevented proper appreciation of the “modernism being enacted” in the shipyards. Outlining the historical context in a way which elides the political (and cultural) importance of Ulster Protestantism within the Empire - “Technically, the ship was built in what was, and formally remains, a part of Britain: the northern-Irish town of Belfast”⁹² - Hawthorn misses some of the implications behind the *Titanic*’s “posthumous literary life...in Irish - and especially Northern Irish literature”, suggesting that “the more specifically Irish associations of the *Titanic* - cultural and political - are passed over in silence” by Robert Johnstone and Derek Mahon.⁹³ In Mahon’s “Bruce Ismay’s Soliloquy” (retitled “After the *Titanic*”), it is, he writes, “the view of Ismay as victim” which is “[c]entral to the

⁹¹ Ironically, one of the earliest fictional treatments of the disaster *did* come from within that community. See St John Ervine, *Changing Winds*, quoted note 85 above.

⁹² *Cunning Passages* 152.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 157.

poem".⁹⁴ Perhaps, taking this further, one could instead see Ismay as the representative figure for a collective guilt which is as unacknowledged as it is irrational as it is also perceived to be a characteristic of the Ulster Protestant community.⁹⁵ And Mahon's "A Refusal to Mourn", often missed by collectors of *Titanic* poems, is, as Longley points out, "not only an elegy for his boiler-making grandfather but a requiem for the *Titanic* and for Belfast as a shipbuilding city".⁹⁶

Instead, it is McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster* which, like a gift from the gods, provides a "good example" for Hawthorn of "the way in which the more local symbolic associations of the ship and its fate could be tapped in a literary work".⁹⁷ McGuinness uses *Titanic* folklore to create a web of guilt, pride, lost pride, superstition, and premonition - the *Titanic* forewarns of the Somme: "Every nail we hammered into the *Titanic*, we'll die the same amount in this cursed war". In the play, the *Titanic* offers itself, as Hawthorn points out, as a "perfect symbol" for a "doomed generation of Ulster Protestants, going down in the Battle of the Somme as helplessly as those passengers and crew in the ship which represented their pride."⁹⁸ But perhaps a caveat, or at least a reminder, is sometimes necessary in relation to *Observe the Sons of Ulster*: the *Titanic* in the play is, it is made clear, a fiction, whose "life in popular myth" does not necessarily equate with the ship that sank, but so too is the Ulster Protestant generation in the play that it symbolises.

It is impossible, of course, to "locate", once and for all, the "significance" of the *Titanic* in an Irish context. It does not possess innate significance: it was a ship which, like numerous other ships, sailed and sank (though it did so, as Foster points out "at the

⁹⁴ Ibid. 155.

⁹⁵ The poem does not, as Hawthorn assumes, post-date Frank McGuinness's 1985 *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, where the sense of guilt is implicit in Anderson's line "We weren't to blame. No matter what they say". It appeared under the title "As God is my Judge", a title more evocative perhaps of the evangelical tradition of those who built the ship, in Mahon's first collection, *Night Crossing*, in 1968. At least one should be wary of claiming, as Hawthorn does, that Mahon's "use of the ship and its fate is radically different from the use made by Frank McGuinness" (*Cunning Passages* 157). There is also an argument for suggesting that McGuinness's use of the ship in his play owes something to the *Titanic*'s previous appearances in the poetry of Mahon and MacNeice.

⁹⁶ *The Living Stream* 99.

⁹⁷ *Cunning Passages* 153.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 155.

very centre of contemporary cultural preoccupations”⁹⁹). Any significance attributed to it seems to carry its own agenda. So perhaps one *could* offer it as a symbol of the Ulster Protestant community, not because of its perceived connection with war, modernity, hubris, class-structure, Imperialism etc., but because the *Titanic* and the Ulster Protestant community can both, in terms of cultural preoccupations, become the victims of “improper” expectations. The desire for the *Titanic* to “mean” something, or for the Ulster Protestant community to “say” something (witness the critical over-dependence on a play which seems to do exactly that), are desires which, even if they presuppose essential or innate qualities, reveal little about their objects and more about the politics of interpretation.

IV.

This is not to denigrate McGuinness’s play itself, but to point out that it is neither the first, nor the most complex imaginative exploration of aspects of Irish involvement in the Great War. (It is preceded by, amongst other things, Jennifer Johnston’s account of cross-barrier friendship in the trenches in *How Many Miles to Babylon?*.) The negative perceptions of Ulster Protestantism’s culture, and its politically determined, reductive self-perceptions (which the reception of McGuinness’s play reveals to be still current), have, in one sense, been invalidated in the work of, amongst others, Longley and Mahon. (In other words, the tongue-tied, at one time artistically-cornered Ulster Protestant community has already “said” several things.) Remembrance gives way in Mahon and Longley to a more painful form of remembering, and their poetry contains, at times, self-exhortations not to allow the latter to collapse into the former. (Mahon’s “Once more, as before, I remember not to forget” [“The Spring Vacation”], redirects and rehabilitates Ulster Protestantism’s own self-exhortation, “Lest We Forget”.) Mahon has engaged with aspects of *Titanic* and war mythology in relation to Protestant memory; Longley with the story of the Ulster Division at the Somme, and with the consequent politicisation of remembrance North and South. For both, it is an

⁹⁹ “Imagining the *Titanic*” 329.

engagement which predates the renewal of interest in Ireland and the Great War among historians and literary critics, and one whose role in stimulating that renewal is sometimes overlooked.

Edna Longley notes that the 1966 commemoration of the Easter Rising “revived a waning piety”.¹⁰⁰ Remembering and revisiting Easter 1916 in literature has been a thriving industry: the Rising is anthologised, analysed, and revised to an extent that bears comparison with the Great War industry in England. But at the time of that revival in piety, poetry in Northern Ireland also addressed the question of First World War remembrance, already felt to be problematical, and prompted in part by the fiftieth anniversary of the Armistice. It is worth noting that it began to do so before the Troubles, and before any explicit, or journalistic connection of a war-torn Northern Ireland with the landscape of the Great War.¹⁰¹ In *Room to Rhyme*, a 1968 anthology of poems by Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, and ballads collected by David Hammond,¹⁰² Longley included a poem, “Remembrance Day”,¹⁰³ which pondered the betrayal and possibility of poetic redemption of “Our godforsaken heroes, // Outlandish dead beneath whose / Medals memory lies bruised.” Two “Remembrance Day” poems appeared in the *Honest Ulsterman* in 1968/9. The first, by James Simmons, casts the speaker as “soldier-spokesman”, who, like the soldier in wartime, “was simple, anxious, aimed by fierce desire”, but who finds himself “dream-marching at some cenotaph / Which is [his] poems”, mocked, derided, heart-broken.¹⁰⁴ Jack Holland’s “onremembranceday1968” also dwells on the problem of memory, on “the Great War” he “cannot remember” when “Autumn perished in November” dwindling to the

¹⁰⁰ *The Living Stream* 70.

¹⁰¹ Cf. the effect on Heaney of the 1966 Easter Rising commemorations, discussed by Edna Longley in “The Rising, the Somme and Irish Memory,” *The Living Stream* 70-71, and also Heaney’s indebtedness to the Great War in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966), explored in Ch. 7 below.

¹⁰² (Belfast: Arts Council, 1968)

¹⁰³ Subsequently collected in *No Continuing City* (London: Macmillan, 1969) 44. The first half of the poem, quoted from here, was cut in *Poems 1963-83*, 1985 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991), and the revised poem retitled “Aftermath”.

¹⁰⁴ James Simmons, “Remembrance Day,” *Honest Ulsterman* 6 (October 1968): 5.

“Remembrance Day collectors...perishing at street corners”.¹⁰⁵ John Montague’s *The Rough Field* projects back to the immediate aftermath of the Great War as a way of understanding, and revising understandings of, his home ground. In John Hewitt’s recollections of a “Belfast Boyhood”, he revisits the aftermath of the Great War, the discrepancy between pre-war enthusiasms and post-war actualities - “our cheering then my memory often mocks” - at a time when “Bishops...hurled opposing prayers to God”.¹⁰⁶ (The list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.)

More so than any of his contemporaries, Michael Longley, as will be seen, evinces in his work an almost overwhelming concern with remembering and memorialising the dead, offering poetry as a possible vehicle in which to combine “[t]he cure and the remembrance”.¹⁰⁷ To elegise the dead is also to redeem them from the narrow perspectives which have dominated politicised forms of remembrance. But this is not an exercise which has been confined to those writing in the “Protestant” tradition, in spite of Longley’s almost intimidating example, and in spite of the prominence, in contemporary Northern Irish politics, of Protestantism’s association with the Great War. (On the contrary, perceptions of Ulster Protestantism’s character and history have complicated both the terms and the evaluation of its literary response.) For Longley, Mahon, and Heaney, addressing the Great War has been, with varying degrees of success, a means of destabilising reductive histories; for all three, it has involved a break with communal silences, whether Catholic or Protestant. This is ultimately to shift the emphasis away from Terence Brown’s view that Heaney’s “dar[ing] to speak...of Catholic nationalist Ireland’s part in the Great War” is “an...even more audacious break with tribal silences” than is found in Longley’s work.¹⁰⁸ Audacity rather depends on what you say. The Unionist Great War package is no less ideologically determined than

¹⁰⁵ *Honest Ulsterman* 11 (April 1969). I am grateful to Keith Jeffery for drawing the poems by Simmons and Holland to my attention.

¹⁰⁶ “The YCVs and the Ulster Division,” and “Portstewart, July 1914,” *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt*, ed. Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1991) 295-6.

¹⁰⁷ Don Shriver, quoted in Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994) 76.

¹⁰⁸ Terence Brown, “Who Dares to Speak?: Ireland and the Great War,” *English Studies in Transition*, ed. Robert Clark and Piero Boitani (London: Routledge, 1993) 235.

the Nationalist one; as a consequence, imaginative engagement with the War and its effect, approached from either tradition, may involve transgression of political (as well as canonical) codes.

Some of those codes are simultaneously transgressed and restated in what is, with the possible exception of Michael Longley's "Wounds", perhaps the best-known contemporary poem concerned with Ireland and the Great War, Heaney's "In Memoriam: Francis Ledwidge".¹⁰⁹ The poem stands, therefore, as an example of subversion *and* perpetuation of historical and cultural myths.¹¹⁰ It is one of a series of elegies for artists, friends and relatives in *Field Work*, but is also a poem overtly concerned, not just with remembering the dead, but with the politics of remembrance in Northern Ireland. In the latter sense, it both undermines and reinforces problems surrounding perceptions of Irish involvement in the Great War. Its starting point is the Portstewart war memorial, "[t]he bronze soldier...forever craned // Over Flanders". The memorial, with its "loyal, fallen names" establishes the Great War as an apparently Protestant phenomenon, something felt, initially, to be of little relevance to the poet-figure, the "worried pet...in nineteen forty-six or seven" walking "[a]long the Portstewart prom". ("[L]oyal"'s connotation is loyalist; "fallen" reminds of Laurence Binyon's 1914 poem "For the Fallen", that staple of British Remembrance Day ceremonies.) But Francis Ledwidge is a figure who connects the speaker to that war: Ledwidge is "[l]iterary, sweet-talking, countrified", belonging with "the May altar of wild flowers, / Easter water...Mass-rocks", a Great War soldier who is, he states explicitly (in case the point has not already been grasped from the preceding images), a

¹⁰⁹ *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979) 59-60.

¹¹⁰ This ambiguity, and the complex issue of remembrance which engenders it, has allowed for divergent, sometimes curious readings. Andrews discusses Ledwidge's failure in the poem to "appreciate the feelings that lay behind the 1916 Rising" and suggests Heaney treats the failure "with savage irony", an interpretation that misses the ultimate irony of Ledwidge's empathy with the Rising rather than with the Great War. *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 132. Henry Hart writes that Ledwidge, "[h]aving betrayed his community's trust by following the English army [*sic*] on a massive Orange Day march into World War I...now consorts", as a corpse, "with dubious allies and obvious enemies". *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1992) 128. Neither of these interpretations does justice to the subversive potential of the poem; Terence Brown's praise, on the other hand (see note 108 above) does not fully acknowledge the collusion as well as audacity inherent in the poem.

“haunted Catholic”. The divided psychic landscape is implicit in place itself: the poem ranges rural, pacifist, and Catholic on one side; Protestant, urban and militaristic on the other.¹¹¹ Ledwidge, displaced from the former, “[g]host[s] the trenches with a bloom of hawthorn”. One objection to the poem might be that it reinforces certain stereotypes even as it breaks the tribal taboos: it opposes pastoral to war, and in doing so follows a long tradition of English and Irish poetic practice, but it also appropriates pastoral for a Catholic, or Nationalist tradition, making the opposition mirror the sectarian fault-lines. Equally, though, in writing Nationalist Ireland back into the Great War, it also challenges some of the myths through which those fault-lines have been sustained. The poem enacts remembrance which public memorializing obscures. “[L]oyal”, while it casts those named on the memorial as Protestant, is also redefined by the emergence of Ledwidge in the poem: the Protestant myth that only Protestants were capable of loyalty in 1914-18 is revealed as false by Ledwidge’s own “loyalty” that has no loyalist connotations. The claim that Heaney’s poem “fully addresses the questions Ledwidge’s death raises”¹¹² is slightly extravagant; but the poem does at least raise those questions, and acknowledges the failure in language that it also enacts:

In you, our dead enigma, all the strains
 Criss-cross in useless equilibrium
 And as the wind tunes through this vigilant bronze
 I hear again the sure confusing drum

You followed from Boyne water to the Balkans
 But miss the twilit note your flute should sound.
 You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones
 Though all of you consort now underground.

¹¹¹ Cf. Mahon’s description of the Portstewart memorial which recognises the division inherent in the symbolism, but sees the opposition in a slightly different form: “Portstewart is dominated by an immense convent school on a cliff, and the stone cross on the roof is visible everywhere, giving the place a curiously Castilian air. Halfway along the promenade, however, there’s a cenotaph commemorating those who died in the world wars; and the pugnacious stone Tommy on top, vigorously bayoneting the sea wind, seems to repudiate the cross which predates him. The memorial plaque lists both Catholic and Protestant names, and some which might be either, yet I can’t help feeling that the stone soldier is a bloke from the old Kent Road.” “Un Beau Pays, Mal Habité,” *Magill* 2.5 (February 1979): 20-22.

¹¹² Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 1989) 89.

Ledwidge is given the title Tom Kettle, another Nationalist casualty of the Great War, also earns from his biographer - "enigma". The phrase "our dead enigma" points to Heaney's awareness that Ledwidge distorts the stereotypical perceptions of the role of a Nationalist Irishman in 1914-18. But it simultaneously highlights the non-existence of any terms of reference outside those stereotypes. If "all the strains / Criss-cross in useless equilibrium", they do so (hence "useless") at a point beyond definition. The wind "tun[ing] through this vigilant bronze" evokes loyalist rhetoric ("eternal vigilance") as well as military defensiveness, leading to the "sure confusing drum", and the enlistment described in terms reminiscent of an Orange parade: the drum, the Boyne, the flutes. From such a perspective on Great War involvement, a perspective which has dominated in the North, Ledwidge's "twilit note" is inevitably absent, though in pointing the omission, the poem itself resounds that note. In doing so, it risks reducing one version of history in order to restore another, simplifying perceptions of the "other" - "these true-blue ones" who, by implication, had some certainty about their motives, and were not out of place in the trenches - in order to introduce, through Ledwidge, a new complexity. The last line of the poem evokes Owen's "Strange Meeting", as it also recalls the aspirations (naïvetés) of those Irish politicians who hoped that consorting underground might, in the longer term, exercise a beneficial effect on the surface. The "Balkans" remind of the earlier time of confusion in Irish political and military history; the more recent Serbian wars also project that confusion into the present: as Terence Brown notes, while the Troubles in Northern Ireland have forced it back on its own history, "the map of early twentieth-century Europe [has] re-emerge[d] like a prior print in a palimpsest".¹¹³

The poem's struggle with reductive histories and inadequate language makes it in some ways paradigmatic of the wider struggle in Northern Ireland to confront difficult aspects of the past, and to redefine the present through that confrontation, to shift the emphasis from "Lest We Forget" to how we remember. Northrop Frye writes that "[t]he culture of the past...is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried

¹¹³ "Who Dares to Speak: Ireland and the Great War" 237.

life", and that "study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life".¹¹⁴ Following on from this, Paul Fussell presents "recognition scenes" from the Great War on the grounds that "what we recognize in them is a part, and perhaps not the least compelling part, of our own buried lives".¹¹⁵ The quest in Northern Irish poetry for a voice to uncover repression, to articulate a "cultural form" beyond simple antithesis, makes a return to the buried past of the Great War as compelling and as prevalent as it is in the English modern memory Fussell explores.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 335.

¹¹⁵ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 335.

Chapter 6



A Dying Art: Irony, Apocalypse, and Imperial Breakdown in the Poetry of Derek Mahon.

"Somehow Ulster Protestants are expected to be ironical. This is a way of explaining the liberal Ulster Protestant and apologizing for him...By being ironical, we somehow escape culpability."

-Derek Mahon¹

"I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."

-Paul Fussell²

"...all ironies, in fact, are probably unstable ironies."

-Linda Hutcheon³

One of the problems of MacNeicean criticism has been a tendency to judge MacNeice's poetry according to English history and literary tradition, rather than according to the complex relations between Irish and English history and tradition. The same has been true in relation to Derek Mahon, whose response to the Troubles is criticised by Stan Smith as being anachronistic, one of "shell-shocked Georgianism".⁴ Edna Longley offers a corrective in her essay "The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon's Poetry": "That Irish history does not march with English history, or in certain respects stands still, does not render obsolescent the *poetry* which grows out of it."⁵ In making his criticism, Stan Smith gestures towards, yet misses, a crucial point about

¹ "Q & A with Derek Mahon," interview by James J. Murphy et al, *Irish Literary Supplement* 10.2 (Fall 1991): 28.

² *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) 35.

³ *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994) 195.

⁴ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982) 189.

⁵ *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 171.

Mahon's imagination and Ulster's history: the role of the First World War in shaping both, and the continuing relevance of the years 1914-1918 to Ulster's cultural and political development. Smith is right that the poet's response to the Northern Ireland troubles evokes a memory of the Great War, and the problem of the poetic response to that war, but he is wrong to assume that such an evocation equates with the war's position in English modern memory. Ironically, the anachronism here is Smith's, who in claiming that Mahon's tone might be "mistaken for indifference before the ugly realities of life, and death, in Ulster", seems to be making a call to poetic arms (as others did before him in the First and Second World Wars), suggesting that Mahon should rise to the occasion in a recognisable role of war poet, instead of keeping his hands "indubitably clean".⁶

It is a call which Mahon, like MacNeice, Graves and Yeats, writing "in times like these" before him, resists: "we're supposed to write about the Troubles; a lot of people expect us to act as if it were part of our job - it's not, unless we choose to make it so."⁷ But, as with Yeats, resistance to a type of war-writing is not *ipso facto* an evasion of war, its consequences, or its place in cultural memory. It may even be the opposite. Mahon's poetic response to violence has been "learned" from the memory of the Great War, from his predecessors, and from his own experience of Ulster in the Troubles. He shares with MacNeice a tendency to approach the earlier conflict as a means of understanding Ulster Protestantism, Ulster's relations with England, and his own place within the "community". At no point in his work does Mahon explicitly approach the problematic subject of Ulster's remembrance of the Great War, but he considers England's remembrance of that war in relation to his own position as "enlightened alien", as someone who regards English pieties with a perspective informed by his experience of Ulster. While the Troubles in Northern Ireland engage his attention, and although he writes in a post-World War II context, he is drawn, obliquely, to the Great War as a means of understanding contemporary events.

⁶ *Inviolable Voice* 189.

⁷ Derek Mahon, "A Very European Poet," interview by Eileen Battersby, *Irish Times* 10 Nov. 1992: 12.

Mahon's role as a poet in relation to violence is therefore more complex, in response to his context, than the ones Smith attributes and prescribes. Deane perceptively describes him as "dazzlingly sophisticated", an urbane and civilised figure with perfect formal control, and yet one who within that sophistication gives an unparalleled sense of apocalypse, "abysmal chaos", "wild formlessness"⁸: as such, he stands not in opposition to Ulster Protestantism, but as inheritor of both its self-control and its fear. "[W]hat is alive", as Longley points out, "*cannot be* anachronistic. The creative baton changes hands throughout the English speaking world and the compost of poetry accrues unpredictably."⁹ Reactions to the First World War in England and Ireland are paradigmatic of this unpredictability. The cultural effect of the Great War in England, rather than in the English speaking world, and the influential studies of that effect by Fussell, Hynes, Silkin and others, can lead to an interpretative exclusivity (for English-speaking read English¹⁰) that posits some Irish writers as out of touch. Similarly, the Ulster Protestant community finds itself castigated for its failure to develop politically in line with England, in other words its failure to "keep up" with England's post-war, post-imperial developments. Tom Paulin describes loyalist terrorism as issuing partly "from a cultural quality which might be described as a trapped and backward-looking anger - the Protestant working class is unique in Europe 'in that it is the only working class not to have been radicalised by World War I'". He continues: "UVF terrorists...were prepared to torture and kill in order to remain in their chosen imperial time-warp".¹¹

Paulin is looking here at an extremist faction within Ulster's loyalist community. He does note the crucial point about Ulster Protestantism's response to the Great War and the imperial breakdown consequent upon that war, that is, its *difference* from the

⁸ Seamus Deane, "Celebrant of Lost Lives and the Sublime," rev. of *Selected Poems*, by Derek Mahon, *Irish Times* 22 Dec. 1990: Weekend 8.

⁹ *Poetry in the Wars* 171.

¹⁰ Fussell, it should be noted, points out that his study does not extend outside England to include the Irish experience (*The Great War and Modern Memory* ix) and adheres to these limits, whereas Hynes, also focusing on England, is more inclined to fall into the trap of ascribing universality to the English experience in the War, and the English artistic response to that war.

¹¹ Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1984) 138.

English response. But “time-warp” is still potentially reductive and misleading. To perceive Northern Ireland as existing within a “time-warp” is to ascribe to an alternative, in this case English, culture an impossible role as objective guardian of time, historical truth, and progress. It is not so much that “Ulster is what England (or Europe) was”, or that this apparent stagnation is mirrored in its literature and culture. It is, rather, that Ulster and England, with different goals in mind, predicate identity on differing social and cultural codes after 1918. Attempts (and self-attempts¹²) to dissociate Mahon from his working class, Protestant Ulster background - to view him as exile, an outsider with an “urbane perspective”, and so on - implicitly pass judgement on the “community” from which he is apparently detached. Such urbanity and self-reflexivity, these attempts suggest, cannot exist within the Protestant community. In a curious mixture of perception and prejudice, Seamus Deane writes:

It would be possible to write of Mahon’s poetry as though it enacted a drama of belonging and not belonging to a country itself isolated from world history, divided within itself, obsessed by competing mythologies, Northern and Southern, ambiguously ensnared in the subtle politics of colonialism and independence, a central void with violent peripheries. Terence Brown has written eloquently on these themes and it is right to admit their force and the bearing they have on this ultimately “protestant” poetry. *For Mahon does not enjoy or seek to have a sense of community with the kind of Ireland which is so dominant in Irish poetry.* All his versions of community depend on the notion of a disengagement from history achieved by those whose maverick individuality resisted absorption into the official discourses and decencies. [My italics]¹³

The drama of belonging and not belonging is, as Deane implies, operating on the level of intention as well as interpretation, for reasons which will be explored later. But he also implies that Mahon is oscillating between the two poles of belonging and not belonging because the “belonging” available is to different mythologies of history, which are designed to serve certain political ends, those of coloniser and colonised. And one is, according to Deane’s reading, more worth having than the other: Mahon does not

¹² Michael Allen has argued that Mahon’s poetic development is marked by a desire to sanitise his public image from any relation to the protestant community. “Derek Mahon: The ‘Protestant Community’ and ‘The North’,” seminar paper, Queen’s University, Belfast, 1993.

¹³ “Derek Mahon: Freedom from History,” *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber, 1985) 159-60.

“seek” it, but, and the value judgement is inherent in this, neither is he privileged to “enjoy” it. “[W]orld history” in this view is somehow detached from this internal struggle; Mahon is doubly displaced in apparently seeking detachment from both world history *and* competing Irish mythologies.

More productively, to locate Mahon within the community and within history can expand the notion of what the community is. His poetry enacts the struggle between simplified mythologies and complex historical circumstances, a struggle which has been characteristic of Ulster Protestant memory, perhaps of “modern memory” more generally, in this century, and a struggle which has also been characterised by repression. It is, in this sense, a poetry which is “ambiguously ensnared” (between what is said and unsaid, also between what is sayable and unsayable), but one which need not function within Deane’s dual framework of Northern colonialism and Southern post-colonialism, nor one which is caught between a time-warped Ulster and a progressive, post-Imperial England. Neither anachronistic nor escapist, Mahon engages with problems of Ulster Protestantism’s post-First World War historical sensibility: the relationship between Protestantism and violence; the concept of Empire; cultural relations with England; the implications for an Ulster Protestant of the attenuation of religious belief in England and elsewhere.¹⁴

Terence Brown suggests that “the contemporary northern protestant’s history...seems impoverished by comparison with nationalist historical awareness...because that history has had to perform fewer functions and is necessarily simpler”.¹⁵ Further, “[o]nly a community with very simple historical needs could maintain such an extraordinary, near-unanimous reticence about the complications of its past”.¹⁶ As discussed previously, that reticence is apparent in the Northern Irish reaction

¹⁴ The decline in religious belief is such that Judith Kazantzis, in her preface to *Scars Upon My Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1981), finds it necessary to contextualise the poetry by reminding the reader that “1914 middle class England was a Christian country” xviii. At the end of the Great War, Orwell notes, “[t]he slump in religious beliefs” in England “was spectacular”. “Inside the Whale,” *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol.1 (London: Penguin, 1970) 553.

¹⁵ *The Whole Protestant Community: the making of a historical myth*. Field Day Pamphlet No. 7 (Derry: Field Day, 1985) 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 10.

to the First World War, “reflecting...the reluctance of some Ulster people to confront with honesty their own place in history and, in particular, to question the true nature of their link with Britain”.¹⁷ Mahon addresses imperial breakdown through an evocation of England and Northern Ireland which points up their different response to decline of Empire, and therefore the failure in understanding between the two. Yet what Orr means by the “true nature of [the] link with Britain”, a recognition of the fact that Ulster is no longer the “Imperial Province” can also acknowledge a close cultural link which is not necessarily dependent upon the existence of Empire. Mahon’s relationship to the English tradition simultaneously invalidates as it acknowledges a breakdown in understanding: he restructures the relationship in terms which recognise English and Ulster anxieties. Traditionally, as has been seen in the cases of Matthew Arnold, Robert Graves and others, Ireland can be used poetically to interrogate the values of imperial England. In Mahon’s case, as with MacNeice, an England in imperial decline, with its own mythical simplicities, can serve to illustrate Ulster or Ireland.

“Afterlives”¹⁸ exemplifies both the dependency and misunderstandings which can characterise the Ulster/England relationship. Structurally, parts 1 and 2 of the poem are mutually dependent: the return to Ulster is informed by the experience of England; the

¹⁷ Philip Orr, *The Road to the Somme* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1987) 227. See also Ch.1, 26 above. The British Empire was a title applied to Britain by residents of the Shankill as recently as the 1970s.

¹⁸ *The Snow Party* (London: OUP, 1975) 1-2. Subsequent references appear in the body of the text as (*SP*, page number).

Mahon’s revisions to his poems are complex and significant, and have fuelled considerable debate. See Peter Denman “Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon’s Revisions,” *Irish University Review* 24.1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 27-37. He describes Mahon’s poetry as “a work in constant progress”. Edna Longley, on the other hand, suggests that “[t]he urge to revise...is an urge to rewrite history”, doomed to failure because the poet “cannot revisit the *period* of composition, let alone the mood”. “Where a Thought Might Grow,” rev. of *Selected Poems*, by Derek Mahon, *Poetry Review* 81.2 (Summer 1991): 8. Very few of the poems from individual volumes subsequently collected in *Poems 1962-1978* and in *Selected Poems* (1991) remained unrevised. But Mahon has, progressively, excluded more and more poems from his first three volumes in the later selections, and a number of early poems have, as a result, appeared only in one version. In the interests of consistency, therefore, all quotations from the poetry are drawn from the earliest versions of the poems (unless the revisions themselves are under review) as they appeared in *Night-Crossing* (London: OUP, 1968), *Lives* (London: OUP, 1972), *The Snow Party* (London: OUP, 1975), *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), *Antarctica* (Dublin: Gallery, 1985), and from *Poems 1962-78* (Oxford, OUP, 1979) and *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle: Gallery, 1991) only if this is the first time the poem is collected. The poems are cited by their original titles, with any significant title changes advised in parentheses.

second Ulster section forces a retrospect on the English opening. (One might go so far as to say that the less satisfactory part 1 exists only to make part 2 triumph.) The liberal intellectuals of part 1 believe in progress and education, have “faith” that war will be a thing of the past, will become merely an aspect of history to:

...amaze the literate children
In their non-sectarian schools
And the dark places be
Ablaze with love and poetry
When the power of good prevails. (*SP*, 1)

There is, in the poem, a reaction against this complacency: it is a misconception based on self-aggrandisement and a form of irresponsibility - “What middle-class cunts we are / To imagine for one second / That our privileged ideals / Are divine wisdom...” (*SP*, 1). The “orators” and “guns...in a back street” disrupt, or should disrupt, certain pieties sustainable in England if not in Northern Ireland. Yet it is this reaction, in part 1, that makes the return home in part 2 more complex than it might have appeared from the vantage point of London. There are no simple oppositions based on experience; instead, every understanding attained falls short of reconciliation. In spite of the reaction against liberal intelligentsia, on the return to Belfast, he can “scarcely recognize / The places I grew up in”. The “I” never finally locates itself, but splits imaginatively (“I” who might have stayed; “I” who left). This split self questions the possible virtue of direct experience of the Troubles, and ponders the possible changes in perception that experience would have engendered:

Perhaps if I’d stayed behind
And lived it bomb by bomb
I might have grown up at last
And learnt what is meant by home. (*SP*, 2)

Significantly, the thought remains speculative. On the one hand, the poet might be seen as succumbing to a belief - implicit in the aesthetic of some of the Great War poets - that direct experience gives a kind of poetic mandate to speak as well as a responsibility to do so. On the other, the movement of part 1 finds its echo in part 2, from the “moon-splashed waves exult” to the recognition of alienation: the “dim / Forms that kneel at

noon / In the city” are and, in the end, are not “ourselves”. While he might have “learnt what is meant by home”, the experience of part 1 does allow for the possibility that such understanding could be as illusory as the “bright / Reason on which we rely / For the long-term solutions” (*SP*, 1).

Mahon, like MacNeice, is negotiating several different contexts and traditions - English, American, Irish and Northern Irish - drawing on all of them to avoid “idol or idea, creed or king”.¹⁹ If he inherits Fussell’s “dominating form of modern understanding”, he does so through the mediation of Yeats, the war poets, and MacNeice, and also through Eliot, Lowell, and the American tradition. “England”, as it appears in his fourth collection, *The Hunt by Night*,²⁰ is a place bewildered by an influx of “alternative” culture and nostalgic for its pre-1914 certainties, a place where a huge gap yawns between generations, but where there is still comfort to be found in recycling the old myths (as in “One of these Nights”, *HN*, 50): “traditional” and “modern” sometimes conspire, but more often co-exist uneasily. It is also an England imagined in relation to New England, resulting in a complex intertextuality between American, English and Irish literary traditions, and exploring imperialist cultures outside of Deane’s Anglo-Irish framework.

The collection as a whole is indebted to Lowell’s neo-colonial exposé in *Near the Ocean*.²¹ Lowell’s connection with Heaney has frequently been noted: Raban’s description of Lowell’s language - “the vocabulary is clotted, syntax and metre buckle under the pressure of experience”²² - strikes an immediate chord with what Hobsbaum describes as “Heaneyspeak”, and with Heaney’s desire to “take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before”.²³ Hobsbaum, in fact, draws the lines of influence from Yeats to Eliot, through to Lowell, and from Lowell to Hughes, Hill and

¹⁹ Louis MacNeice, “Train to Dublin,” *Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. E.R.Dodds (London: Faber, 1966) 28.

²⁰ (Oxford: OUP, 1982). All subsequent references appear in the body of the text as (*HN*, page number).

²¹ (London: Faber, 1967). I am grateful to Michael Allen for discussion of the connection between these two volumes.

²² Jonathan Raban, introduction, *Robert Lowell’s Poems: A Selection* (London: Faber, 1974) 16.

²³ Seamus Heaney, 1973. Quoted in Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1986) 95.

the Belfast Group (in other words, Heaney).²⁴ But if *Near the Ocean* marks a shift for Lowell - for Axelrod it is the point where he "became a public poet in earnest"²⁵ - it is also the volume which illustrates Mahon's thematic and stylistic links with the earlier poet. The "quarrel" with Puritan ancestors; the poetic struggle under the weight of the "Faith of our Fathers", an oppressive Calvinist theology; the apocalyptic sensibility; the "agonised whirl of tradition and modernity";²⁶ the protest against war in its imperial forms; urban elegy - Mahon is, predictably, drawn to all these aspects of Lowell's writing. *The Hunt by Night* not only picks up the tone and mood of Lowell's poems, but also structurally and thematically has much in common with *Near the Ocean*. Lowell's concern in *Near the Ocean* is with the dubious policies of a neo-colonialist America, "Hammering military splendor, / top-heavy Goliath in full armour".²⁷ The translations in the volume are, Lowell writes in his preface, connected thematically by "Rome, the greatness and horror of her Empire".²⁸ "America" itself, he states elsewhere, "is something immense, crass and Roman".²⁹

Mahon's "Courtyards in Delft" and "Another Sunday Morning", both in some ways responses to Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning" and "Central Park" in *Near the Ocean*, explore war and imperialism. The first displaces Ulster's militant Protestantism into a seventeenth-century Dutch painting; the second adapts England's twentieth-century imperial decline as a metaphor for the endings of all civilisations. In both the poet tentatively proposes that art itself has a Yeatsian answer to violence, decline and fall. In "Courtyards in Delft", the "chaste / Precision of the thing and the thing made" (HN, 9) is perfect but limited. As Terence Brown points out, the composure is achieved only by the exclusion of "music, eroticism, lust, politics and the imperial adventurism which was the source of that wealth which made Dutch society so stable and secure but which...became the cause of 'fire / And sword upon parched

²⁴ Philip Hobsbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) 7-8.

²⁵ Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton UP, 1978) 177.

²⁶ Raban, introduction, *Robert Lowell's Poems* 21.

²⁷ "Waking Early Sunday Morning," *Near the Ocean* 15.

²⁸ *Near the Ocean* 9.

²⁹ Quoted in Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* 190.

veldt””.³⁰ This is empire which simplifies its self-presentation to preserve its own stability, and its own provinciality. It is, for the poet, a concept with which he is familiar - “I lived there as a boy...” (*HN*, 9) - and one whose “chaste / Precision” is undermined whenever his own imagery comes into contact with the “benighted” Antrim coast. Stephen Kern points out that the use of arboreal imagery to express the expansion of the nation was frequent in the late nineteenth century, when the British Empire was at its height.³¹ It is also imagery which was forever changed by the experience of the Great War, with its shattered branches, burnt-out tree-stumps, bits of men stuck in trees, and *vice versa*. For writers in the Great War, trees become parallels for the mutilated human condition: Henri Barbusse describes “a row of excoriated willow trunks, some of wide countenance, and others hollowed and yawning, like coffins on end”; for Blunden, Thiepval Wood is an “apparition”, “a black vapour of smoke and naked tree trunks or charcoal”.³² In Mahon’s “Courtyards in Delft”, “No breeze / Ruffles the trim composure of those trees” (*HN*, 9). They stand for stability, uniformity, nature perfectly controlled. In an earlier poem, “The Return” (later retitled “Going Home”), there is, instead, a “stubborn growth / Battered by constant rain / And twisted by the sea wind”, which symbolises Ulster Protestantism’s besieged mentality as well as the poet’s conception of his own role, but is also reminiscent of the landscape destroyed in the Great War:

Its worn fingers scrabbling
At a torn sky, it stands
On the edge of everything
Like a burnt-out angel
Raising petitionary hands.

Grotesque by day, at twilight
An almost tragic figure
Of anguish and despair,
It merges into the funeral
Cloud-continent of night

³⁰ Terence Brown, “Derek Mahon: the Poet and Painting,” *Irish University Review* 24.1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 46.

³¹ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983) 239.

³² Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 1916, trans. Fitzwater Wray (London and Toronto: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1929) 272. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 1928 (London: Penguin, 1982) 90.

As if it belongs there.³³

If "Courtyards in Delft" sees what is there in terms of what is missing, "The Return" inserts that unsaid, or unseen, into his vision of a post-war and "troubled" Ulster. The poet in "Courtyards" is "lying low in a room there, / A strange child with a taste for verse, / While my hard-nosed companions dream of war..." (HN, 9). While "lying low" may be read simply as keeping out of the way, it also allows for the possibility that the poet's low profile and apparent uselessness is in fact a conscious waiting for the right moment, for fulfilment of his subversive role (a sentiment also articulated in "Rage for Order"), a role which, it might be said, is already fulfilled in "Going Home".

Fredric Jameson suggests that the "problem of imperialism" has been restructured since World War II:

in the age of neo-colonialism, of decolonisation...it is less the rivalry of the metropolitan powers among each other that strikes the eye...rather, contemporary theorists...have been concerned with the internal dynamics of the relationship between First and Third World countries, and in particular the way in which this relationship - which is now very precisely what the word "imperialism" means for us - is one of necessary subordination or dependency, and that of an economic type, rather than a primarily military one. This means that in the period from World War I to World War II the axis of otherness has as it were been displaced: it first governed the relationship of the various imperial subjects among each other; it now designates the relationship between a generalised imperial subject...[and] its various others or objects.³⁴

In "Courtyards in Delft", Jameson's displacement appears in reverse: the poem projects forwards to contemporary Ulster but approaches the problem of imperialism in its phase of military rivalry, anticipating the potential destructiveness, and self-destructiveness, of a culture which will "punish nature in the name of God" (HN, 10). "Another Sunday Morning", set in the heart of a former Imperial power, views that destruction, with subversive humour, as almost complete. In Jameson's terms, the poem must articulate post-post-imperialism, where: "Black diplomats with stately wives, / Sauntering by, observe the natives / Dozing beside the palace gates-" (HN, 29). Who can tell the

³³ *Poems 1972-1978* 99-100.

³⁴ *Modernism and Imperialism*, Field Day Pamphlet no. 14 (Derry: Field Day, 1988) 9.

coloniser from the colonised? The age reverses itself, becomes its own opposite in true Yeatsian fashion. The latter half of the poem echoes MacNeice's opening to *Autumn Journal*, where "summer is...Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawn where close-clipped yew / Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals".³⁵ Mahon's "old ladies" who remember Kitchener are "Exhausted now / By decades of retrenchment" and "Wait for the rain at close of play" (*HN*, 29). "Retrenchment" operating somewhat maliciously in several different ways - the gradual erosion of the Empire's territory; the decline in individual fortunes; the slowly decreasing numbers of those who *do* remember - also locates the source of decline in the trenches of the Great War. It is also the war which invalidates the code of conduct - playing the game - by which the "natives" were trained to live, leaving nothing to wait for but death.

The poem reassesses MacNeice's claim in *Autumn Journal* (I):

It is this we learn after so many failures,
The building of castles in sand, of queens in snow,
That we cannot make any corner in life or in life's beauty,
That no river is a river which does not flow.³⁶

It is also in part a response to MacNeice's "Sunday Morning", where the attempt to "abstract this day and make it to the week of time / A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme" fails because there is "no...Escape from the weekday time. Which deadens and endures."³⁷ Mahon's "old ladies", and his "old man...Making dreadnoughts out of matches" are caught in a timewarp of their own creating, but one which is also an illusion, since the flow of time simultaneously denies it: "So many empires come and gone..." (*HN*, 29). They are, in this sense, no more or less time-locked than the new age strollers in the park: "Rastafarians...provincial tourists, Japanese / Economists, Saudi families" (*HN*, 28). In both cases, a failure of recognition is implied: "now" is as transitory as "then":

Asia now for a thousand years -
A flower that blooms and disappears

³⁵ *Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* 101.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 102.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 23.

In a sand-storm... (*HN*, 29)

Another Sunday morning is as much another millennium as it is the mere passing of one week. If the poet is a “chiliastic prig”, complacent in the possession of a particular metaphysical world view, he is also self-aware in that there was an Asiatic pre-Christian civilisation no more or less valid than his own. “Another” implies that there may always be “another”. Operating within the frame of reference this civilisation gives, the poet delivers his own Sunday morning sermon, and flies:

The private kite of poetry -
A sort of winged sandwich board
El-Grecoed to receive the Lord;
An airborne, tremulous brochure
Proclaiming that the end is near. (*HN*, 28)

The poet is here both the prophet of doom, making his proclamation, and the powerless figure whose art, by its nature, and regardless of intention, is, like MacNeice’s castle in the sand, inherently indicative of the approaching end of civilisation. Yet the feeling of helplessness, while it might be an inevitable consequence of the argument of the poem, is no more felt as helpless than the Yeatsian poetic which, if true to its “Vision”, works on the assumption of its own ultimate destruction in a cyclical process. In this sense, Mahon takes the bleakness, sometimes despair, of Robert Lowell’s poetic, and re-casts it in terms which rely for strength on acknowledgement of its own frailty - its transience. Lowell’s “Waking Early Sunday Morning” (challenging the latent optimism of Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”) mourns the loss of certainty, of the “Faith of our Fathers” - “Each day, He shines through darker glass” - and the resulting chaos of imperial tragedy: “a million foreskins stacked like trash”.³⁸ While Christianity is not to be regretted of itself, the void it leaves is just that - a void: “Pity the planet, all joy gone...”.³⁹ Mahon’s “Another Sunday Morning” begins in light: “the sun make[s] bright / The corners of our London flat” (*HN*, 28); Lowell’s dawn is a “daily remorseful blackout”. The desire to escape is ever present in Lowell. “Central Park” has been described as an “urban apocalypse”, with its “images of despair”: “a grounded kite...The

³⁸ *Near the Ocean* 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 16.

stain of fear and poverty”, the “life-term in jail”, “a snagged balloon”.⁴⁰ Within this bleak context, “All wished to leave this drying crust, / borne on the delicate wings of lust...”. His image of escape is “a single, fluttery, paper kite” which “sailed / where the light of the sun had failed”;⁴¹ but one senses that the poetry, like the poet, is left in the dark, grounded and yearning. Mahon takes this image in his own Lowellian prowling around the park in “Another Sunday Morning”, and makes of it an aesthetic principle: “The private kite of poetry”.

Like Lowell, Mahon can be, as Brown points out, “an elegist for a vanishing civility, a pessimist of the present moment”.⁴² But, in terms of Mahon’s own comments about Beckett - “Sometimes I have a curious sense that Beckett is almost a sentimental writer, and if he’s a sentimental writer I don’t know who isn’t. Having hit rock bottom as you do with him, you know there’s nowhere to go but up”⁴³ - the elegist and pessimist is also, in recognising the transitional nature of human achievement, a latent optimist. Hence, the “locked heart, so long in pawn / To steel”, to the building and destroying of empires, may be redeemed by the “pure, self-referential” act, even when that act will not outlast its own civilisation (*HN*, 29). The illusion of creation and progress in empire-building is countered with the act of creation that reaches to nothing outside itself, that rises above the now commonplace “harsh refusal to conceive / A world so different from our own” (“The Globe in North Carolina”, *HN*, 62). “A good poem”, Mahon famously stated, “is a paradigm of good politics - of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level.”⁴⁴ The “harsh refusal” to do so leads to political stalemate - a militaristic single-mindedness or a bewildered nostalgia, neither of which are open to the diversity which would at once prove their undoing and their virtue. So Mahon, while elegising a civilisation, also elegises the elegy itself:

You will tell me that you have executed

⁴⁰ See Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* 190-91.

⁴¹ *Near the Ocean* 23-24.

⁴² “Derek Mahon: the Poet and Painting” 46.

⁴³ “Each Poem for me is a New Beginning,” interview by Willie Kelly, *Cork Review* 2.3 (June 1981): 11.

⁴⁴ “Poetry in Northern Ireland,” *Twentieth Century Studies* 4 (Nov. 1970): 93.

A monument more lasting than bronze;
But even bronze is perishable.
Your best poem, you know the one I mean,
The very language in which the poem
Was written, and the idea of language,
All these things will pass away in time.⁴⁵

Longley suggests that “the contrasting effect of Yeats on Mahon and Philip Larkin...seems to follow the lines of Anglo-Irish/English difference”. Mahon, “in the light - or dark - of his Ulster Protestant background lacks Larkin’s attachment to ‘customs and establishments’”. He takes certain Yeatsian modes for a further walk on the wild side, and into renewed tension between the imagination’s ‘rage for order’ and historical convulsions.”⁴⁶ Mahon shares with Larkin a profound understanding of the way in which England has remembered the First World War, and has dealt with its imperial past. But to understand is not to collude, and Mahon also pushes what in Larkin can appear as nostalgia for the pre-1914 idyll and recognition of its disappearance a further step down the road to cultural reflexivity. Larkin’s “MCMXIV” captures images of the lines of recruits, the commercialised imperial paraphernalia, as they appear in memory. It is less a poem about August 1914 than it is about the mythicised remembrance of 1914. Geoff Dyer points out that “there is a sense in which, for the British at least, the war helped to preserve the past even as it destroyed it....The past *as past* was preserved by the war that shattered it.”⁴⁷ Larkin’s poem contains awareness, and is implicitly a critique, of this version of history, of an “innocence” that “changed itself to past / Without a word”.⁴⁸ It does not create but explores an existing historical myth, and one whose power does not seem to have diminished even with recognition of its inaccuracies. (That the final phrase, “never such innocence” was used as the title for an anthology of First World War poems nearly thirty years after the poem appeared only reaffirms the currency of the 1914 myth.) Mahon also writes, in “Homecoming”:

⁴⁵ “Heraclitus on Rivers,” *Poems 1962-1978* 107.

⁴⁶ Edna Longley, “Where a Thought Might Grow” 7.

⁴⁷ *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Penguin, 1995) 5.

⁴⁸ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and the Marvell Press, 1990) 127.

we cannot start
at this late date
with a pure heart,
or having seen
the pictures plain
be ever in-
nocent again.⁴⁹

But in “MCMXIV” it is not only 1914 that is “innocent”: the post-war vision of 1914 is also (deliberately) innocent. Its existence in memory becomes, in the poem, a ceremonious and stylised remembrance rather than a disturbing remembering. Perhaps remembrance of 1914 is itself a peculiar way of not remembering the war that followed.

Mahon, in “A Kensington Notebook”⁵⁰ locates the end of an era not in 1914, though he plays on the 1914 myth, but in the retrospective judgements of the post-war years. Tom Nairn suggests that “resistance to modernity is in reality not separable from the senility of the old imperialist state”;⁵¹ the poem challenges the assumption that modernity necessarily leads forward from the old state by tracing the marginalisation by the modern state of three figures at one time representative of its modernist movement. “A Kensington Notebook” is a restrained, sometimes ambiguous tribute to three literary figures of pre-war London (Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis), a series of quirky biographical sketches, and an elliptical overview of a period of literary history from 1914 to the Second World War. On another level, it engages with the question of artistic responsibility, and its consequences. Ford, Mahon hints, made an aesthetic compromise in the face of war (writing commissioned patriotic poetry and prose), setting out his “toy soldiers on the / Razed table of art” (A, 9). Robert Lowell speculates along similar lines in “Ford Madox Ford” (to which poem Mahon’s “A Kensington Notebook” Part I is partially indebted):

Was it war, the sport of kings, that your *Good Soldier*,
the best French novel in the language, taught
those Georgian Whig magnificoes at Oxford,
at Oxford decimated on the Somme?⁵²

⁴⁹ *Lives* 1. All subsequent references appear in the body of the text as (L, page number).

⁵⁰ *Antarctica* 9-14. All subsequent references appear in the body of the text as (A, page number).

⁵¹ *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1981) 45.

⁵² Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (London: Faber, 1959) 63.

Mahon parodies, with a deliberate tonal naïveté, the supposed realities of 1914, echoing Rupert Brooke's 1914 sonnets ("swimmers into cleanness leaping" and so on) and also the pastoral idyll of the English countryside, with its untamed beauty:

There was a great good place
Of clean-limbed young men
And high-minded virgins,
Cowslip and celandine... (A, 9)

That pastoral idyll is what Ford, with patriotic fervour, applauds as worthy of defence, however alien it might have been to the majority of urbanised recruits: they go to die "because our land is beautiful and green and comely, / Because our farms are quiet and thatched and homely, / Because the trout stream dimples by the willow..."⁵³ "A Kensington Notebook" questions, not just the failure of idealism, but the illusion of freewill, of chosen destiny, held by those who fought the war (those who survived it and those who did not), the extent to which they were victims as well as creators of their moment in history:

What price the dewy-eyed
Pelagianism of home
To a lost generation
Dumbfounded on the Somme? (A, 9)

Ford's departure from England coincides with the destruction of "England": "'The last of England' / Crumbles in the rain / As he embarks for / Paris and Michigan" (A, 10). The Ford at the centre of London's literary activity becomes, after fighting in the war, an "old cod" (playing on Lowell's description of him with "mouth pushed out / fish fashion"⁵⁴) marginalised by a "land / Unfit for heroes" (A, 10), forced into exile, and devoting his declining years to love and love poetry. Mahon approaches 1914-18 from an unusual and subversive perspective, evoking a survivor of the war who colluded in encouragement of that war, and found himself something of an anachronism in a new world that dismissed 1914 as forever vanished. He also evokes the war artist who

⁵³ Ford Madox Ford, quoted in Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, 1972 (London: Ark, 1987) 196.

⁵⁴ "Ford Madox Ford," *Life Studies* 63-64.

rejected conventional representations and depicted “The death-throes of an era” (A, 12) and yet who, anything but an anachronism (Orpen takes that role⁵⁵), turns on post-war culture and is also, like Ezra Pound, (self)-exiled for fascist affiliations. “The last of England” is, then, a complex and ironic phrase: subversively, it may be Ford himself, (who at one time attempted to obtain German nationality); or it may be the generation dying in the trenches, for those who died came to represent England in a way the survivors did not; it may also be the post-war culture Ford leaves behind to “crumble”; alternatively, the line evokes an end of England as an infinitely recurring event, (since Ford Madox Brown’s painting of that title depicted the artist/immigrant, disillusioned with the old world, leaving for the colonies some seventy years earlier). Any consideration of Mahon’s Kensington artists suggests that England consisted of something more complex than the idea of “dewy-eyed / Pelagianism” which it perpetuates in its own 1914 myth. Ford, as exemplar of this, may be the uncomplicated patriot of the war years; he is also one of those who, in the 1914 *Blast*, attacked the smugness of English culture, and in the post-war years interrogated patriotic values in *Parade’s End*. It could be argued that the war served to simplify England’s conceptions of its own cultural history, and homogenise diverse opinion into the 1914 enlistment queues. Lewis, Pound and Ford all find themselves in one way or another rejected by or rejecting post-war society: they exist as cultural influences who are sometimes sidelined by a cultural norm. Mahon’s tribute to them, albeit cast in the negative, does nevertheless credit them with survival as artists in spite of marginality, self-condemnation, treason and so on:

...‘available
Reality’ was increased,
The sacred flame kept alive,
The Muse not displeased;

And if one or two
Were short on ἀγάπη,
What was that to the evil
Done in their day? (A, 13)

⁵⁵ An Irishman who was also an official British war artist.

At some level, the inability of society to accommodate its “outsiders” (those drawn, like Pound, to extremist positions) and aspects of its own history may bring about its own downfall, more than, in the case of England in the Great War, the mass slaughter of its “innocent” troops in the trenches. The moral, with regard to Ulster’s repressive, Calvinist culture, at one time, if not still, unfriendly to its artists, is sufficiently pointed. Mahon is habitually drawn to those who spoke for and of their time, but were still unaccommodated by it: Ovid, Lowry, Van Gogh, de Hooch, De Quincey, Nerval, Graves, and so on. Ford, Lewis and Pound are not usually considered part of Mahon’s “tribe”; nevertheless, the questing and solitary individuals of “A Kensington Notebook” do have something in common with those other “tempest-torn” figures who appear throughout his work. The concept of a lost tribe is an adaptable and encompassing one: it may apply to those who fail to comprehend the limitations of the historical simplicities, (to go back to Brown’s formula for Ulster Unionist history), by which they live; or, alternatively, it may apply to those who in recognising them, “depict[s]/ The death-throes of an era”, and are, metaphorically or literally, expelled from the city gates.

Tom Nairn suggests that:

Trapped...between past and future, Ulster Protestantism was unable to formulate the normal political response of threatened societies: nationalism. Instead, what one observes historically is a lunatic, compensatory emphasis of the two ideologies already strongly present in its community: militant Protestantism and imperialism. It is as aberrant substitutes for nationalism that these idea-systems have to be understood...⁵⁶

To some extent, Nairn, like others, implies that Ulster has somehow failed to formulate the “correct” response. England, hardly a threatened society in Nairn’s sense of the word here, resorts to the nationalism which helped to form the empire as a response to the loss of empire. Nationalism engenders a security within borders which can then override loss of territory elsewhere. Ironically, the two ideologies Nairn detects as strongly present in the Ulster Protestant community were also, up to 1914, strongly

⁵⁶ *The Break-Up of Britain* 236.

present in England. If loss of empire constitutes a threat to society, then repression of those ideologies - militant Protestantism and imperialism - may be England's own, "lunatic", compensatory measure. Ulster and England have, in other words, dealt with the First World War in ways which not only differ but can conflict. The impact of modern warfare and consequent attenuation of religious belief in England makes the Ulster writer from a background of militant Protestantism impossible to explain in an English context, in spite of the many aspects of shared history - for example, the experience of fighting in the Great War itself. Mahon's "Brighton Beach" reminisces about the "rough sectarian banter / Of Lavery's back bar" (*HN*, 34) in Belfast, but describes Brighton as indicative of "Decline", "the spirit of empire / Fugitive as always" (*HN*, 35). "Brighton Beach" is, as Colin Graham points out, Mahon's "Dover Beach" scenario, "the spirit of place", like the "sea of faith" in decline.⁵⁷ Like "Afterlives", the poem works on a two part structure where, ironically in view of Deane's comments quoted earlier, it is England which seems "isolated from world history"; Ireland which is given the images of life and activity.

If both Mahon and Larkin mourn the end of civilisations, Mahon "preaches" from a more extreme position. He does so because, for the Ulster Protestant, the apocalyptic quality of Protestant writing is bound up with the disintegration of empire, in contrast to the nostalgia which feeds into the English self-image. Ulster's militant Protestantism might proclaim its struggle as being "For God and Ulster"; but in the First World War, the popular sentiment was also "Ulster will strike for England / And England will not forget". To make this connection is problematical: political betrayal, as a consequence, can be formulated in religious rather than secular terms. Loyalist nostalgia would be an admission of political and religious defeat: Ulster Protestantism's rhetoric has not shifted its ground in the twentieth century because a wistful yearning for a pre-1914 era would imply that the informing principles behind that era - the faith, the union - have disappeared. The past is therefore a continuous present. Contrastingly,

⁵⁷ See Colin Graham, "Derek Mahon's Cultural Marginalia," *Returning to Ourselves*, ed. Eve Patten. (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995) 246.

in England, the acceptance that the historical continuum is irrevocably broken means that the past is de-problematised in its relation to the present. It has an “irreversible pastness” conducive to nostalgia. Nostalgia can thus be symptomatic of a culture which accepts the insecurity and breakdown of the current condition and is thereby able to sentimentalise or idealise a secure past. Apocalypse, in contrast, is the language of insecurity but the product of a culture which resists breakdown, which holds itself “eternally vigilant” on the edge of contemporary chaos. Anticipation of apocalypse holds the present moment intact.

Both these categories collapse in, and into Mahon’s poetry: he subscribes neither to an obsolete ideology, nor to a complacent sense of “newness” affirmed against a fixed sense of the past. Poetry displaces ideology to become the holding operation (“Edvard Munch”, *L*, 4, retitled “The Studio”) as it also points the dangers of reductive historical interpretation - “history / ignores those who ignore it, not / the ignorant whom it begot” (“The Sea in Winter”⁵⁸). His vision has been described as “neither revolutionary nor utopian”, but “nostalgic”: “Rather than re-imagine history, he takes refuge in a nostalgic vision in which we can find neither a ‘usable past’ nor a ‘usable future’”.⁵⁹ This is to limit his vision. Characteristic of Mahon’s nostalgia is its yearning for a pre-historical, pre-linguistic, pre-civilised world; “post” is interchangeable with “pre” for it can also be nostalgia for an imagined future - “the lives we might have led”. But since nostalgia can idealise history - “Cowslip and celandine” - then Mahonesque nostalgia for what is imagined is less of a disengagement from history, or a refuge, than it might at first appear. It is, in some ways, a nostalgia for what has not been, a history re-imagined: what might have been, or might be, is no more or less fictional than versions of past or present. When life and art collide in his poetry, the vision is not only nostalgic: it is also apocalyptic, and within that vision he plays havoc

⁵⁸ *Selected Poems* 117. (These lines do not appear in the earlier version of the poem in *Poems 1962-1978*.)

⁵⁹ Patricia Horton. “Romantic Intersections: Romanticism and Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry,” diss., Queen’s University, Belfast, 1996, 100.

with the illusions of security in the very language in which, for a Calvinist culture, a form of security is found.

In this aspect of his work, his connection to, and inherited strategies from, First World War writing are particularly apparent. The war poets, as they spoke in apocalyptic terms of the ending of a western system of Christian morality, tended to abandon one notion of the sacred, but often only to replace it with another - in Graves's case his White Goddess - one which was freed from the doctrines which had led them to the trenches.⁶⁰ Owen's comment is as pertinent to Mahon's poetry as it is to the trench poets: "There is a point where prayer is indistinguishable from blasphemy. There is also a point where blasphemy is indistinguishable from prayer".⁶¹ For Jay Winter, apocalypse in First World War writing is the last gasp of a nineteenth century way of thinking, which demonstrates the Great War to be a "nineteenth century war" provoking literature "touching on an ancient set of beliefs about revelation, divine justice, and the nature of catastrophe".⁶² He argues that such literary imagery grew "out of date" and became "unusable" after 1945:

Apocalypse is predicated on divine justice; where was justice after the gas chambers? The literary metaphor of the Apocalypse could accommodate virtually every human catastrophe except the ultimate one. The archaic quality of this language was a link with the past; it drew the mind back to older visions and older certainties.⁶³

But it is questionable whether apocalypse was used by even the Great War poets in terms of its divine justice. It offered a voice in which to speak and to pass judgement, but not necessarily one predicated on the existence of any Christian "justice". (The

⁶⁰ As Jon Silkin points out, the preoccupations of Owen and Rosenberg, also possibly Jones and Read were "religious", since their occupation struck at the heart of religious beliefs. "[P]ure Christianity", Owen wrote, "will not fit in with pure patriotism". *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1981) 20-21. Organised religions reconciled the two concepts in wartime, (as has occurred also in Northern Ireland), provoking the questioning and subversiveness characteristic of Great War verse. Cf. also Michael Longley's "The Linen Workers" which rethinks Christian imagery in the context of the Great War and the Northern Ireland Troubles.

⁶¹ Quoted in Robert A. Hinde, ed., *The Institution of War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992) 97.

⁶² Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 178.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 203.

Book of Revelation has always occupied an uneasy and disputed place in the New Testament of forgiveness and justice, in part because its Old Testament links are stronger than in any other Christian book.) Perhaps, more simply, it provided a set of images for the wasteland in which the poets found themselves which, because of their familiarity, could, with different handling, point to the extent to which “older visions and older certainties” had been undermined, rather than seeking comfort in them. It is on that level that language functions most effectively to criticise and subvert in the Great War: to work imagery in terms of what is “known” can also show how unknown it has become. Rosenberg’s “Break of Day in the Trenches” is, in Fussell’s view, the greatest poem of the war “partly... because it is a great traditional poem”, which “while looking back on literary history...also acutely looks forward”.⁶⁴ (As will be seen, Keith Douglas and, later, Michael Longley, also work this technique in the contexts of different wars in their responses to Rosenberg’s poem, itself responding to the literary tradition which preceded it.)

This is also Mahon’s strategy for elucidating Ulster Protestant cultural memory, but allowing the poetry to stand as testimony to the ways it has, or can, alter. He thus fulfils an ambiguous dual role as preacher or prophet who sets out to demonstrate what cannot be preached or prophesied. An early poem, “Ecclesiastes” is paradigmatic of this ambiguity. The poem rests on the ultimate irony that while Ulster’s evangelical Protestantism might promise “nothing under the sun”, in another way, that is also precisely what the prophet of Ecclesiastes claims himself: “all is vanity...The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose...the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit”.⁶⁵ The poet criticises the emptiness at the centre of the “God-chosen” society which itself preaches that emptiness to draw its people to repentance. The absent “I” in the poem - the one who feels called upon to “understand and forgive” - attacks the “You”, the embryo preacher who does not, with all the vengeance of a prophet. The backward-

⁶⁴ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 250.

⁶⁵ Ecclesiastes, King James Version 1:2-5. 2:17

looking movement - to “the heaped graves of your fathers” - is shown to be a repressed communal ego through a parody of the exhortation to repression - “Bury that red / Bandana and stick, that banjo” - an exhortation which states unequivocally what the communal ego never could, that it sustains itself through wilful blindness: “close one eye and be king” (L, 3).

Northrop Frye writes of Ecclesiastes that:

Those who have unconsciously identified a religious attitude either with illusion or with mental indolence are not safe guides to this book, although their tradition is a long one. Some editor with a “you’d better look out” attitude seems to have tacked a few verses on to the end suggesting that God trusts only the anti-intellectual, but the main author’s courage and honesty are not to be defused in this way. He is “disillusioned” only in the sense that he has realized that an illusion is a self-constructed prison. He is not a weary pessimist tired of life: he is a vigorous realist determined to smash his way through every locked door of repression in his mind. Being tired of life is in fact the only mental handicap for which he has no remedy to suggest.⁶⁶

In some ways, this critique of the preacher is a blueprint for understanding Mahon’s role as poet. “Ecclesiastes”, in offering a harsh critique of Ulster Protestantism’s own “self-constructed prison” - its denial of pleasure, its economic and religious stagnation, “the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings” (L, 3) - is also a return to origins, a re-writing that rejects centuries of misreading. The poet displaces the preacher by his assertion that the repressed communal ego is fundamentally flawed because it distorts truth; in doing so, the absent “I”, almost by default, *becomes* the original preacher. With the stylistic repetition that is a characteristic of the source text, as much as it is indicative of a self-constructed prison (Ulster Protestantism has sustained itself politically in the twentieth century by simple reiteration of its “truths”), the use of “God” in the poem to cover the spectrum of belief, pride, disillusionment, blasphemy, contempt, points to the potential insecurity of this rhetorical style.

It is, Jameson points out, now “a commonplace that transgressions, presupposing the laws or norms or taboos against which they function, thereby end up

⁶⁶ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature*, 1983 (London: Penguin, 1990) 123.

precisely reconfirming such laws". Echoing Wilfred Owen, he continues: "blasphemy not only requires you to have a strong sense of the sacred quality of the divine name, but may even be seen as a kind of ritual by which that strength is reawakened and revitalized".⁶⁷ But, he also argues, the problem with this interpretation, is that it places desire:

outside of time, outside of narrative: it has no content, it is always the same in its cyclical moments of emergence, and the event in question takes on historicity only to the degree that the context of the explosion, the nature of that particular and historical repressive apparatus, knows specification.

What is more damaging...is that desire...remains locked into the category of the individual subject, even if the form taken by the individual in it is no longer the ego or self, but rather the individual body...[T]he need to transcend individualistic categories and modes of interpretation is in many ways the fundamental issue for any doctrine of the political unconscious, of interpretation in terms of the collective or associative.⁶⁸

Seamus Deane describes Mahon's prophetic and ironic tone as "rooted in the one desire - to have done with history...to imagine its disappearance in a moment of doom".⁶⁹ If Mahon's transgressions challenge Ulster Protestantism's capitalist, patriarchal and middle-class values, it could be argued that the "elsewhere" he sets up in the poetry disables or limits that transgressive potential.⁷⁰ But it may be more complicated than this. Both these views imply that Mahon is, in effect, trying to do two different and mutually exclusive things: transgress and transcend. (Deane, inevitably, finds difficulty accommodating "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" into Mahon's *oeuvre*, since this poem very evidently pleads for release *into* history.) Mahon's "elsewhere", his "desiring" sometimes, maybe even usually, avoids specificity. But specificity, while it might on one level demonstrate historicity, is not a necessary pre-condition for it. Transgression and transcendence may instead be mutually dependent. Jameson contends that "all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of

⁶⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989) 68.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *Celtic Revivals* 157.

⁷⁰ Patricia Horton argues this point. "Romantic Intersections: Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry and Romanticism" 100.

community”.⁷¹ Mahon, in other words, cannot be in and of the community, transgressing its codes, and simultaneously outside the community, outside history, in a narrative that has no “content”. The existence of desire may be by its nature transgressive: it might aspire to the unattainable “cold dream”, but it is simultaneously a desire rooted in history, recognisable only as desire because it comes from within the community.

That contradiction is confronted by Mahon in his revisions and re-revisions of “Courtyards in Delft”. The poem exists in three versions: the first, in *Courtyards in Delft*, an interim collection published in 1981, has four stanzas; the year after, in *The Hunt by Night*, it has five; in the *Selected Poems*, the poem appears again with four stanzas and slight alterations to the ending. Mahon describes the alteration as “I tried to be too explicit with a fifth stanza and succeeded only in being inept”.⁷² The fifth stanza, which caused the “problem” is, in a way, Mahon’s attempt to find the transcendent solution he is sometimes credited with (and criticised for) offering:

For the pale light of that provincial town
Will spread itself, like ink or oil,
Over the not yet accurate linen
Map of the world which occupies one wall
And punish nature in the name of God.
If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,
Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,
We could sleep easier in our beds at night. (HN, 10)

Here, the problem of militant Protestantism’s imperialist destruction is countered by simple assertion of the female principle absent from Protestantism’s patriarchal ideology. Mahon hankers after the “Womanly Times” exemplified in Robert Graves’s aesthetic: Graves’s “poetic personality”, Mahon writes, “provides the perfect paradigm

⁷¹ *The Political Unconscious* 70. Jameson attributes the importance of Frye’s criticism to his willingness to “draw basic, essentially social, interpretive consequences from the nature of religion as collective representation”. The “illusions” of religion can be “read as the complement of a positive social functionality, and decoded as the figure and the projection of an essentially human energy”. Any doctrine of figurality “must necessarily be ambiguous”. But if religious figures “become the symbolic space in which the collectivity thinks itself”, and to see, with Frye, “literature as a weaker form of myth, or a later stage of ritual” one may then conclude that “all literature...must be informed by...a political unconscious” 69-70.

⁷² Derek Mahon, interview by William Scammell, *Poetry Review* 81:2 (Summer 1991): 6.

of a maleness which, by submitting itself to the female principle, *enhances* its own nature”.⁷³ But, crucially, Mahon views that personality as a subversive and transgressive one: “Graves had spoken in *The White Goddess* of ‘the irreligious improvidence with which man is exhausting the earth’, and he clearly feels that human folly and wickedness are enjoying exponential growth. Those who still dismiss him as an ivory-tower poet might ponder the implications of his work.”⁷⁴ The difficulty with the additional stanza in “Courtyards in Delft” is that the conflict which exists between the poetic personality “lying low” who misses “the dirty dog, the fiery gin” and the “hard-nosed companions” who “dream of war” is already the assertion of a Gravesian poetic. Longley argues that “one way in which Mahon addresses the nexus of religion and history is by transmuting its constrictions within his own artistic structures. Thus relegated to the unconscious, ‘lying low’, poetry is well placed to subvert.”⁷⁵ Transgressive desire is implicit in the poem’s first four stanzas: the insertion of extraneous Maenads in the fifth compromises an internal quarrel by proposing too easy an external answer.

In this context, certain Mahon poems can look like two sides of the same coin: “The Last of the Fire Kings” expresses the desire to be “through with history”, to escape from “the barbarous cycle” (*SP*, 9); “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” desires release into history from the barbarous cycle. “The Last of the Fire Kings” is not so much Mahon’s agenda for escapism, but a poem which holds a middle ground somewhere between a rock and a hard place, recognising two obligations - to escape the barbarous cycle, but to inhabit the world of those who perpetuate it. Both obligations are predicated on an ambiguous sense of responsibility for, belonging to, and (self)-alienation from, a community. That community is, the poem makes explicit, a Northern Irish one, with its “Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows” (*SP*, 10). “A Disused Shed” is a poem cast in more general terms which seems (like Yeats’s “The

⁷³ Derek Mahon, “Womanly Times,” rev. of *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves*, ed. Paul O’Prey *Literary Review* 75 (Sept. 1984): 8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Edna Longley, “Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art,” *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 287.

Second Coming”) to have encouraged very specific interpretations. Heaney’s is one of them:

[Mahon] makes the door of a shed open so that an apocalypse of sunlight blazes onto an overlooked, unpleasant yet pathetic colony of mushrooms. What they cry out, I am bold to interpret, is the querulous chorus that Mahon hears from the pre-natal throats of his Belfast ancestors, pleading from the prison of their sectarian days with the free man who is their poet descendent.⁷⁶

The poem does not limit its historical scope to something less than history, but instead projects its mushrooms/victims back and forward, to natural and “manmade” disasters: “Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!” (*SP*, 37) In thus widening its scope, it allows for readings informed by the concerns of different times and/or cultures. Heaney’s response to the poem should be related to the fact that “A Disused Shed” is, in part, a response to Heaney’s “Bye-Child”.⁷⁷ The Bye-Child, who “Put his eye to a chink”, his “frail shape, luminous, / Weightless...stirring the dust” is, in a way, Heaney’s conception of embryo poet transformed by Mahon into prototype mushroom. Having said that, Heaney’s reading of “A Disused Shed” still strikes as somewhat bizarre: one can describe those in a sectarian prison as, in one sense, “lost people”, but the poem’s energies are directed primarily at the issue of forgetfulness, the victimisation which results from reductive historical memory, a crime of which those trapped in a sectarian mindset have themselves been culpable. Heaney, in making the mushrooms self-aware victims of their own nature, jumps one step ahead by attributing an understanding which the poem itself condemns “us” for not yet possessing. The poem’s concern is, as its epigraph makes clear, with what has been forgotten. In a way, it is a natural heir to Mahon’s earlier self-exhortations in “In Belfast”, (retitled “The Spring Vacation”), where, confronted by “the unwieldy images of the squinting heart” he consciously affirms “Once more, as before, I remember not to forget”.⁷⁸ Memory is not without

⁷⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1989) 49.

⁷⁷ *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972) 71-72.

⁷⁸ *Night-Crossing* 6.

responsibility; neither, therefore, should it be an unquestioned or unquestionable “given”.

In so far as Mahon does temporally locate “A Disused Shed”, he dates the mushrooms back to Ireland’s “civil war days”, and the poem’s imagery to some extent encourages a perception of the mushrooms as war victims. One of the ways in which they can be interpreted is as stemming from a vision which draws on the horrors of the trenches; with men buried alive, shell-shocked, sharing their underground prison with the decomposing bodies of their companions, drowning in seas of mud, breathing poisoned air, and convinced the war would last forever:

There have been deaths, the pale flesh flaking
Into the earth that nourished it;
And nightmares, born of these and the grim
Dominion of stale air and rank moisture.
Those nearest the door grow strong -
Elbow room! Elbow room!
The rest, dim in a twilight of crumbling
Utensils and broken pitchers, groaning
For their deliverance, have been so long
Expectant that there is left only the posture. (SP, 37)

Like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “A Disused Shed”, though its focus is not the First World War in particular, is more profoundly a memory of war than one might initially suspect. Probably at no other time this century except in the Great War has the imagery of these lines been so literally true of the human condition. Any consideration of remembrance of the war in Ireland, and of the way in which its victims were and are manipulated by conflicting ideologies serves to make “Let not our naïve labours have been in vain” (SP, 38) particularly poignant. And, as with Yeats’s “The Second Coming”, while the poem is open to interpretation in a European context, it is also implicitly a critique of colonial relationships. The “flaking flesh” evokes a memory of the victims of the Irish famine, the people “groaning for deliverance” from colonial servitude and poverty.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*, which shares some of its imagery with “A Disused Shed”, connects a forgotten and misrepresented people - the Irish peasantry - with famine victims: Maguire, the peasant ploughman is “half a vegetable”, “in a mud-walled space...unknown and unknowing”, “hungry for life” and light, peering, after death, “Through a crack in the crust of the

In “The Last of the Fire Kings” and “A Disused Shed”, the issue addressed is that of historical memory. The community he exhorts to remember in the latter poem may be the community that pressurises the poet in the former. “Who lives by the sword // Dies by the sword” (*SP*, 9) is an indictment of the way in which the past is remembered, or rather not remembered. So if “Last of the Fire Kings” resists the pressure to subscribe to historical myth, “A Disused Shed” looks for a release into cultural memory that transcends the repressions by which such myths function. It is, in this sense, the “break with tradition” that “Last of the Fire Kings” reaches towards.

Jay Winter suggests that the “vigorous mining of eighteenth and nineteenth-century images and metaphors to accommodate expressions of mourning is one central reason why it is unacceptable to see the Great War as the moment when ‘modern memory’ replaced something else...which...I have called ‘tradition’”.⁸⁰ Where traditional literary motifs - prolific in First World War writing - are adapted to a new and subversive function, the semi-paradox of modern memory exists. The phrase, like the understanding it describes, is paradoxical in what it combines. It is because of the co-existence of conflictual elements (the complacencies inherited; the reality confronted) that irony has become, as Fussell points out, the “one dominating form of modern understanding”. It enables the writer to traverse the distance between the familiar, the reassuring, and the incomprehensible which demands expression. It offers the illusion of critical distance from the events it describes, and it presupposes the author to be no longer “deceived”. If a death was significant pre-1914, it acquires significance in the war years only when it makes an ironic point, because only then, as Fussell suggests, is it sufficiently “memorable”.⁸¹ Further, “[t]he irony which memory associates with the

earth”. *The Complete Poems*, 1972, ed. Peter Kavanagh. (Ireland: Goldsmith Press, 1984) 86, 96, 101-03.

⁸⁰ *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* 5. While not disputing his conclusion here, it is worth noting that although he attributes the phrase “modern memory” to Paul Fussell, he in fact takes it to mean “modernism...the work of elites”, so in pointing out that the modern and traditional intersect, he is in fact only restating what Fussell’s study of this, under the title of “modern memory” already assumes. For Fussell, remembering, conventionalising and mythologising the war meant a reliance on “inherited myth” but also generated “new myth” which became “part of the fiber of our own lives” (*The Great War and Modern Memory* ix). It is in Fussell’s sense that “modern memory” is understood in this chapter.

⁸¹ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 31.

events, little as well as great, of the First World War has", he claims, "become an inseparable element of the general vision of war in our time".⁸²

One reason why this ironic strategy is not confined to the war years, or the soldier poets, may be that if one can now be undeceived about pre-war pieties, they have not been written out of existence. Fussell writes:

In 1918, the Somme area now cleared of the enemy, someone in authority in the Durham Light Infantry erected an elaborate twenty-foot-tall memorial cross atop the notorious Butte of Warlencourt...[Painted on the cross] in a circle around the intersection - it is a Celtic cross - [are] the words "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" Did Owen ever see this cross? No, he wrote his poem a year before it was put up. Did those who set up the cross see his poem? No, it was not published until two years later. This is to suggest the unlikelihood, then and now, of the chivalric and the antichivalric taking much notice of each other. Despite the shock of the Somme and a thousand subsequent disillusiones, the chivalric tradition, enfeebled and compromised though it may be, remains one of the attendants of social and political conservatism. For its part, the antichivalric impulse takes off in the opposite direction, its rude skepticisms helping to consolidate the gains of Modernism and Post-Modernism.⁸³

The Ulster Unionists can, without irony, publish a pamphlet celebrating the Ulster Division's achievements at the Somme entitled "Rather be an Ulsterman". Recent evidence of social and political conservatism is not confined to Northern Ireland. The cross to which Fussell refers was brought back from the Somme in 1926 and now holds pride of place in the military chapel of Durham Cathedral, where irony is neither intended nor understood by its presence, and this in spite of the by now familiar Owen poem.

The point of this is to suggest that irony, while it may be redemptive for the poet, is an interpretative as well as, perhaps even more than, an intentional act, and one which depends for its effect on the notion of a community which can grasp it. In the case of Derek Mahon, irony is the single most noticed yet unchallenged factor in his poetry: "a poet of ironically long-term perspectives"; a "terminal ironist"; "an ironic

⁸² Ibid. 33.

⁸³ Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*, 1988. Rpt. as *Killing in Verse and Prose* (London: Bellew, 1990) 232.

conscience at one minute to midnight".⁸⁴ For Mahon, as for the First World War poets, irony enables the poet to travel the distance between political conservatism and what Longley terms "historical convulsions". It is a means of dealing with the way in which his poetry is "ambiguously ensnared", and it also helps to sustain that ambiguity as a dialectical strength. In cultivating this ambiguity, between the said and unsaid, Mahon crosses boundaries, and breaks culturally repressive codes of silence using irony as a means of assuming critical distance. In this way, irony can function as "a way to avoid the single and dogmatic",⁸⁵ a "mode of combat"⁸⁶ in which "[p]olitically speaking, the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is virtually impossible to fix her or his text convincingly".⁸⁷ Hence Mahon's "by being ironical, we somehow escape culpability". But the claim is more complex than this. Linda Hutcheon starts from the premise that "nothing is ever guaranteed at the politicized scene of irony".⁸⁸ intentionality, as declared by Mahon, cannot control interpretation. Further, "irony invokes notions of hierarchy and subordination, judgement and perhaps even moral superiority".⁸⁹ Hutcheon writes:

From the point of view of the intending ironist, it is said that irony creates hierarchies: those who use it, then those who "get" it and, at the bottom, those who do not. But from the perspective of the interpreter, the power relations might look quite different. It is not so much that irony *creates* communities or in-groups: instead...irony happens because what could be called "discursive communities" already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony.⁹⁰

"Mahon's poetry", Edna Longley writes, "starts from the premise of its repudiation by the tribe".⁹¹ It is also, perhaps, in danger of operating on the level of repudiation of the tribe in the way in which it deals with that premise. Depending on the context, to apply

⁸⁴ These few examples are taken from blurbs and article titles. It would be difficult to find any critical study of Mahon that does not mention his ironic perspective.

⁸⁵ *Irony's Edge* 44.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 30.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 16.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

⁸⁹ Chamberlain, quoted Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* 17.

⁹⁰ *Irony's Edge* 17-18.

⁹¹ "An Ironic Conscience at One Minute to Midnight," rev. of *The Hunt by Night*, by Derek Mahon, *Fortnight* 211 (Dec. 1984): 17.

terminology such as “exile” or “ironist” to Mahon may be to take at face value the construction of Ulster Protestantism in the poetry as the whole picture, when the whole picture must also include the poetry that claims to stand outside it. He is, therefore, treading a fine line: the irony that could redeem the community might also, in positing its stereotypical existence as actual, simultaneously damn that community. Ironic self-awareness, which Mahon possesses in abundance, (of what should he be “culpable”, and does he really believe in an “escape”?) gives the poet a status at the top of Hutcheon’s hierarchy; attribution of the irony does likewise. In both cases, there may be a sense in which the Ulster Protestant community is made to work as the discursive community that doesn’t “get” the irony.

Instead, it is more illuminating to see Mahon’s irony as operating, not as the “escape” from the Ulster Protestant community he proclaims it as, but as indicative of “something in flux”, an oscillation “between the said and the unsaid”,⁹² between hope and despair, that resists black and white categorisation. “Irony”, Fussell suggests, “is the attendant of hope, and the fuel of hope is innocence”.⁹³ Mahon’s irony both understands the community, in the sense that it is “innocent” (a community with “simple historical needs”) and unironic, and projects into that community a new form of understanding. In “Craigvara House”, the poet, like Yeats before him in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, envies those who possess the certainty that comes from a form of historical innocence:

I stared each night
at a glow of yellow light
over the water where the interned sat tight

(I in my own prison
envying their fierce reason,
their solidarity and extroversion) (A, 16)

But also, like Yeats (“I turn away and shut the door...”), he finds a different “frequency”, and “crossed by night / a dark channel” (A, 17). The same ambiguity

⁹² Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge* 60.

⁹³ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 18.

towards violent action is shown by MacNeice in *Autumn Journal*: “I envy the intransigence of my own / Countrymen who shoot to kill and never / See the victim’s face become their own” (XIV).⁹⁴ Yet despite this envy, it is, at the end of the earlier “Rage for Order”, the poet’s “germinal ironies” waiting in the wings (*L*, 23). (Mahon the inveterate reviser subsequently gets cold feet about the optimism of “germinal ironies” and changes the line to “desperate ironies”, but does not alter the overall sentiment of the poem, or the revolutionary’s knowledge that he will “have need” of the marginalised poet-figure.) The “germinal ironies” in “Rage for Order” and the “fragile, solving ambiguity” of “In Carrowdore Churchyard”,⁹⁵ are not unconnected.

In “Rage for Order”, the fictive “I” displaces the poet in time of war, and mocks his “dying art”. It ranges the revolutionary and the “people” on one side, and alienates the poet on the other. That the poet is “indulging” his rage for order implies that he should, instead, take action. But “dying art” is, from its first appearance in the poem, laden with irony and ambiguity: while the poet’s art may be a “dying” one, less and less useful as time progresses, and increasingly unlikely even to be strived at, it is, in fact, the embattled speaker of this poem who is involved in, literally, a “dying art”, that of war. If war has had, at times, an almost aesthetic appeal, “art” mocks that perspective by adding “dying” to make a cliché which, MacNeicean-style, works to subvert when it is read literally. But there is another sense in which the poet’s art is a “dying art”, and that is as elegy. Following on from MacNeice, Mahon implies that if poetry appears to be temporarily displaced by war, it is not thereby disproved:

Now watch me
As I make history,
Watch as I tear down

To build up
With a desperate love,
Knowing it cannot be
Long now till I have need of his
Germinal ironies. (*L*, 23)

⁹⁴ *Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* 131.

⁹⁵ *Night-Crossing* 3.

“In Carrowdore Churchyard” appears to ascribe a more positive role to the poet, one which in “Rage for Order”, at least on the surface, is untenable. But if “Rage for Order”, (written, unlike “In Carrowdore Churchyard”, “in time of war”), is reluctant to centralise the poet, it allows only a temporary, almost time-serving displacement: the revolutionary speaker might choose to need the poet only after the battle, but this choice is not prescriptive. From different vantage points, then, one might see these poems as defending or attributing the same poetic capability: in other words, the assumption is that what the poet in “Rage for Order” will do, MacNeice has done. In “In Carrowdore Churchyard”, when the poet is no longer displaced by the “fierce reason” or “intransigence” of the tribe, he is the figure who, metaphorically at least, records change and complexity, ends as well as elegises war, and speaks for and to the tribe. It is a poem in which Mahon, like MacNeice before him, conflating images from both world wars, argues for a world in colour:

This, you implied, is how we ought to live -

The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,
Each fragile, solving ambiguity. So
From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague
Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring
The all-clear to the empty holes of spring,
Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new.

Chapter 7



The End of Art: Seamus Heaney's Apology for Poetry

"What do I say if they wheel out their dead?"

-Seamus Heaney (1972)¹

*"The question, as ever, is 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?'
And my answer is, by offering 'befitting emblems of adversity'."*

-Seamus Heaney (1974)²

I.

"[C]elebrity", Wilfred Owen wrote, "is the last infirmity I desire".³ Unique though the pressures upon Owen may have been, they did not include overt pressure from a public to provide, in his poetry, an adequate response to war - adequate, that is, in terms of social or political rather than aesthetic expectation. Owen does not appear to have been in doubt about what those expectations would have been - his draft preface conducts a quarrel with an imagined readership ("This book is not about heroes...nor...about glory, honour, might, majesty....these elegies are...in no sense consolatory") which, though it may be seen as social commentary, is primarily a defence of aesthetic freedom.⁴ But he remained free, during his lifetime, from critical commentary upon his work, and from pressure, as a public figure, to find for an audience hungry for answers "befitting emblems of adversity". Those pressures were brought to bear upon Owen posthumously. As a result his reputation has, as Mahon points out, "been fought over by critics as much as Vimy Ridge by the opposing armies, and there is little left to say".⁵

¹ "A Northern Hoard: 3. Stump," *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972) 41. All subsequent references appear in the body of the text as (WO, page number).

² *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980) 57.

³ Wilfred Owen, "To Susan Owen," 25 May 1918, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: OUP, 1967) 553.

⁴ See 252-53 below.

⁵ Derek Mahon, "Break of Day in the Trenches," rev. of *Out of Battle*, by Jon Silkin, *Irish Times* 20 Feb. 1988: Weekend 9.

Celebrity, in this sense, is an “infirmity” from which Seamus Heaney has not been immune. If he shares with Owen a dilemma that causes a genuine crisis of response in the poetry to contemporary conditions - as Owen wrote, “am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?”⁶ - he has also both succumbed to, and been a victim of what Edna Longley terms “improper expectations”.⁷ As with Owen, his reputation has been fought over in debates about feminism, postcolonialism, Marxism, and so forth, which have reverberated in critical schools of thought in the United States, Britain and Ireland. Heaney has been castigated, variously, for being too political, or not political enough, praised on the one hand for finding “befitting emblems of adversity”, for crossing boundaries, damned on the other for writing poetry at once “damagingly gendered”, disingenuous, dangerously emotive, and finally tendentious.⁸

Critical views have often been at odds not just with each other but also with the representation of Heaney in the press. The extremes became most apparent when he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1995. The Swedish Academy press release stated the award was given “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt

⁶ Wilfred Owen, “To Susan Owen,” ?16 May 1917, *Collected Letters* 461.

⁷ *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 185.

⁸ Desmond Fennell attacks Heaney’s poetry for its “nothing saying and its poverty of meaning”, arguing that the poems “offer less insight” than the reader already possesses. *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No.1* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991) 20, 27. Edna Longley questions whether the partisanship of some of Heaney’s poems, their sense of “tribal preordination”, particularly in *North*, may have a “petrifying effect on poetic life”. *Poetry in the Wars* 141. Ciaran Carson, in his review of *North*, condemns Heaney for a potentially dangerous mythologising of Northern Irish history. “Escaped from the Massacre?” *Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975). Other critics have praised Heaney’s insightful double perspectives in *North*, his honesty, his effective, subversive, yet compensatory mythologies, and his Yeatsian gift. See for example Sidney Burris, *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1990), and Paul Scott Stanfield, “Facing *North* Again: Polyphony, Contention,” *Éire-Ireland* 23.4 (Winter 1988): 133-44. David Lloyd describes Heaney as a “minor Irish poet” unnaturally elevated because he reinforces rather than challenges the “imperial ideology” that frames his “cultural nationalism”. “Pap for the Dispossessed”: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity,” *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992): 87-116. For Arthur McGuinness, on the other hand, Heaney is an oppressed Irish native who writes for an oppressed people in a language which, though not his own, is reclaimed through the poetry from the colonial oppressor, and turned into an effective mode of resistance: “Politics and Irish Poetry: Seamus Heaney’s Declaration of Independence,” *Études Irlandaises* XV.2 (December 1990): 75-82. Patricia Coughlan argues that Heaney’s poetry is “insistently and damagingly gendered”: “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney.” *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen (London: Macmillan, 1997) 185-205. Others, for example Jacqueline McCurry, have explored and praised the unifying “female thematic elements” in Heaney’s poetic. “The Female in Seamus Heaney’s Prose Poetics and the Poetry of *The Haw Lantern*,” *Éire-Ireland* 23.4 (Winter 1988): 114-24.

everyday miracles and the living past". Heaney was acclaimed in the national press in Britain as "the Irishman without frontiers",⁹ who deserved the prize because of his "insights into Ireland and the Irish - a quasi-political responsibility which transcends the normal vocation of the poet". Harking back to the First World War aesthetic and the expectations placed on poets in wartime, the leading article continues "A writer who had nothing adequate to say about the violence and hatred of those years would not deserve to be honoured at home, let alone abroad".¹⁰ Roy Foster and James Fenton, on the other hand, referred, diplomatically but more reservedly, to his "place in Irish national life that no poet since Yeats has enjoyed" (note "life" not "literature") and his "extraordinary ability to inspire affection in his audience" respectively.¹¹ Heading the case for the prosecution, Robert McLiam Wilson argued, in the Belfast published magazine *Fortnight*, that the Nobel praise-fest was fundamentally misguided. Heaney cannot be praised for "ethical depth" because he has not "straddled and spoken to both traditions in this divided island", "he has largely avoided writing a great deal about political violence in Northern Ireland...he has left out that unpoetic stuff, that very actual mess".¹² In other words, far from having something "adequate to say", Heaney has spoken of, to and for only one side of a dispute, promoting a reductive version of Irishness and thereby claiming his laurels while resting on them.¹³ Michael Parker, on the other hand, in the article "Levelling with Heaney", attempts a corrective to Wilson's polemic in *Fortnight*, arguing that the presentation of Heaney as "an insular, banal, peat-and-potatoes pastoralist...is highly reductive", that Wilson's critique of Heaney fails to engage in any way with the poetry itself, and that many other critiques of

⁹ *The Times* 6 Oct. 1995: 5.

¹⁰ *The Times* 6 Oct. 1995: 21.

¹¹ Quoted in *The Times* 6 Oct. 1995: 5.

¹² Robert McLiam Wilson, "The Glittering Prize," *Fortnight* 344 (Nov. 1995): 24

¹³ Robert McLiam Wilson's harsh caricaturing of Heaney in his recent novel *Eureka Street* (London: Minerva, 1997), develops the idea of Heaney as careerist who plays off all sides with few scruples: "Shague Ghintoss, the poet, had been awarded a knighthood and the Just Us party's very first Hero of the Revolution Award. This unfortunate conjunction had caused him some unease until a fresh-faced young hack had asked him whether he was going to accept both awards as some kind of pan-ecumenical gesture, an attempt to build bridges between the divided traditions. Ghintoss's eyes had gleamed suddenly. 'Yes,' he had said. 'Funny you should mention it.'" 378. See note 19 below.

Heaney do not give sufficient, if any, consideration to “the *specific* historical/political circumstances appertaining when the poet’s texts were produced”.¹⁴

Peter McDonald points out that, in one sense, “the Nobel prize is entirely beside the point...a matter of mere ‘finish’”. “[A]s Yeats was well aware”, he continues, “‘the finished man’ in poetry has to remain something other than a man who is finished, and whose voice responds only its own public resonances”. But, he also suggests, one consequence of the Nobel prize is that “Heaney’s understanding of the plight of the ‘authoritative public poet’...is now more likely to be regularly tested”.¹⁵ The critical debates about Heaney, brought to the fore by the award, centre, ultimately, around three connected issues: how Heaney has responded to the Troubles in Northern Ireland; whether that response is “adequate” (and what determines the notion of adequacy); and, lastly, whether those two questions are themselves an adequate way of evaluating a poetry. Heaney, under pressure, as Longley notes, as “the popular standard-bearer of ‘Ulster Poetry’”¹⁶ is caught in the crossfire of an argument about the function of poetry in the present, troubled times. But he is caught there, not just because of celebrity, but because he himself has centred his work within that debate through what Michael Allen describes as “his bid to influence the climate of taste in which his poems will be read”.¹⁷ What the debate about Heaney has in common at all levels, whether in the Press, in criticism, in self-criticism and in the poetry, is the question of poetry as ethical or unethical, adequate or inadequate, “the need to be both socially responsible and creatively free”.¹⁸ Within Heaney’s *œuvre*, the argument itself goes on at different levels - in his critical prose (Heaney as Heaney); in some of the poetry glossed in that prose and intended to be read alongside it (Heaney as standard-bearer); and in the resolutely

¹⁴ “Levelling with Heaney,” *Honest Ulsterman* 103 (Spring 1997): 103-04. See note 19 below.

¹⁵ Peter McDonald, “The Poet and ‘The Finished Man’: Heaney’s Oxford Lectures,” *Irish Review* 19 (Spring/Summer 1996): 98-99.

¹⁶ Edna Longley, “Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees,” *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, ed. Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982): 480.

¹⁷ Introduction, *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen, 1.

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995) 193.

irresolute aesthetic which in various poems contradicts the other two (Heaney as poet).¹⁹

There is an element of *déjà vu* in the Heaney-debate, hence the suggestion of Wilfred Owen as progenitor. The conflict in Northern Ireland has prompted re-evaluation of questions that have dominated discussions of First World War poetry. With an echo of Owen's "seared conscience" sensibility, the *Irish Times*, as early as 1970, ran a series of articles by Eavan Boland concerning "the Northern Writers' crisis of conscience" in the face of political crisis: what to write; how to write it; how to evaluate what is being written.²⁰ Whether or not the Great War poets found answers to these questions has long been disputed. John H. Johnstone's 1964 study of Great War poetry argues that most of the war poets were "hampered in their efforts to depict or evaluate their experiences" of war by "their almost exclusive reliance on the contemporary lyric response and on the attitudes and techniques inherent in that response".²¹ The experience of the Great War meant that "[t]he 'static lyric' had suddenly been forced to accommodate a flood of experience too vast for it to assess, too various for it to order, and too powerful for it to control".²² Johnstone quotes Synge's well-known comment from 1908 that "before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal"²³ (a sentiment later echoed and adapted by Heaney²⁴). The epic is, in the end, he suggests, the best way to deal with the subject of war, a technique which the

¹⁹ Peter McDonald notes that "it has been necessary for some time past to make the distinction between [Heaney's] poetic authority and his contemporary reputation". Heaney's "authority" begins in the poetry. But, he points out, "[e]ven in Heaney's poetry...this distinction between the sources of authority and the satisfactions of reputation...is liable to break down". "The Poet and The Finished Man" 107. Robert McLiam Wilson's objections to Heaney's Nobel prize, are primarily to do with his reception, his reputation, his influence and public persona; Michael Parker, on the other hand, returns to the text as a source of authority qualitatively different from the public perceptions which make a reputation. In other words, the two arguments, because they make the initial distinction McDonald outlines, miss, rather than engage with, each other's frame of reference.

²⁰ Eavan Boland, "The Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience: I. Community; II. Crisis; III. Creativity," *Irish Times* 12, 13, 14 Aug. 1970: 12.

²¹ John H. Johnstone, *English Poetry of the First World War: A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1964) x.

²² *Ibid.* 13

²³ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁴ "In Ireland at the moment I would see the necessity, since I'm involved in the tradition of the English lyric, to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before...like all the messy and, it would seem, incomprehensible obsessions in the North, and make it still an English lyric." Seamus Heaney quoted in Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 95.

modern war poet found impractical because he was “deprived of the aesthetic advantages of temporal remoteness”.²⁵ Arthur Lane challenges this assumption, arguing that the lyric response in Owen and Sassoon was an adequate response, “both as art and as statement”.²⁶ He claims that they produced a “poetry of protest”, that they radically redefined imagery and style to produce a “startling reversal of the conventional poetic process”, and thus altered perceptions of the capability of the lyric poem to deal with the experience of mechanized warfare.²⁷ And he defends Owen against the epithet sometimes applied of “minor” - Bergonzi, for example, suggests that Owen’s “conscious restriction of range...count[s] against him if he is being considered as a claimant for absolute greatness”²⁸ - arguing instead for the virtues of what he describes as a “Poetics of Responsibility”.²⁹

One reason for connecting Heaney’s dilemma with that of the Great War poets is the ghostly presence of the Great War and its poetry in Heaney’s work, never explored or confronted directly as in Michael Longley’s poetry, but indirectly dictating the terms of response in and to the poetry. The idea of a “poetics of responsibility” is one with which Heaney has engaged throughout his critical writings, and an idea which has undergone subtle mutations from the early *Preoccupations* through to his recent Nobel lecture, *Crediting Poetry*. In an interview with Thomas Foster in 1987, Heaney, echoing Yeats’s *A Vision*,³⁰ describes the first demand placed on the writer to “deal somehow with truth and justice” and the second as:

that you beware of the fallout of your words, and perhaps I’ve been unduly aware of that, of the relationship between lyric and life, of the responsibility for what you say. Geoffrey Hill has three lines in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy*, “Must men stand by what they write / as by their camp-beds or their weaponry / or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and

²⁵ Johnstone, *English Poetry of the First World War* 12.

²⁶ Arthur E. Lane, *An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon* (Detroit: Wayne State UP., 1972) 7.

²⁷ Ibid. 8, 16, 27.

²⁸ Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight* 124.

²⁹ *An Adequate Response* 128ff.

³⁰ Yeats writes that his symbolic system “helped [him] to hold in a single thought reality and justice”. *A Vision*, 2nd ed. 1937 (London: Macmillan, 1962) 25. Heaney’s adaptation of the phrase here, substituting “truth” for “reality” resonates in his perception of “truth” as he relates it to Wilfred Owen. See 251-53 below.

cry?”. In other words, do you have to take responsibility for the effect of your work? And in the North of Ireland, I think the answer is yes.³¹

The “crisis of conscience” of the Northern writer is connected explicitly, through Hill’s lines, to the crisis of the Great War poets. Heaney’s entire critical endeavour may be seen as an attempt to offer an “apology for poetry”. It is, for the trench poets, an endeavour which became, under extreme circumstances, a moral imperative, hence Owen’s question to Sassoon about “Spring Offensive”: “Is this worth going on with? I don’t want to write anything to which a soldier would say No Compris!”.³²

The trenches are, to some extent, Heaney’s own metaphorical starting point, but on the whole, the implications of the proliferation of Great War imagery in Heaney’s poetry have not been explored.³³ If anything, it is likely that such imagery, and the stylistic inheritance from the First World War lyricists, have helped to fuel the criticisms sometimes made of Northern Irish poetry of inadequate neo-Georgianism, of stylistic anachronism. (Great War references do not need to be explicated if they are merely symptomatic of a “time-warped” condition.) Despite his fame, his phenomenal sales, and his apparently established position in the western canon,³⁴ Heaney is often misrepresented in relation to English literary tradition, a victim, albeit a best-selling one, of the same criticisms that have plagued Mahon and Longley. One reason why the references to the First World War, the indebtedness to Owen, Hughes, and an English tradition of war-writing are elided or overlooked in Heaney’s work is, understandably, that he stems from a community with a highly problematical relationship to the First World War. But the pantheon of father figures - Yeats, Joyce, Kavanagh, Montague - which Heaney suggests liberated his own voice should not obscure connections with English literary tradition that also effected some kind of liberation - the work of

³¹ Quoted in Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 1989) 6.

³² Quoted in Lane, *An Adequate Response* 141.

³³ Several critics, including Thomas Foster and Neil Corcoran, remark upon the militaristic imagery of *Death of a Naturalist*, and attribute this to excessive Ted Hughes influence, which, though it is in part a correct assessment, does not explain the more subtle uses of such imagery in the later collections. They do not, however, connect the imagery specifically to the Great War.

³⁴ Heaney, unlike Mahon or Longley, is included in Harold Bloom’s “Canonical Prophecy”, though as Bloom himself notes, “[c]ultural prophecy is always a mug’s game”. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 548.

Hughes, Hill, the war poets, Keith Douglas. Conversely, Heaney does not stand or fall according to the word of English history and tradition. Far from working in an either/or straitjacket (in terms both of literary traditions - English or Irish - or versions of history - grounded in, say, the Rising or the Somme), the poetry, as much as recent historical research, reveals those distinctions as arbitrary.

To some extent, Heaney is caught in a no win situation: the expectations placed upon him are reminiscent of those placed on the Georgian poets in 1914; the accusation of neo-Georgianism thus fails to recognise the culpability of criticism in attributing the need for the quality which it subsequently finds wanting. John Wilson Foster's 1985 essay "Post-War Ulster Poetry" explores some of the inconsistencies in "the tangled relations between English and Irish writers", the "odd mixture of envy and admiration, respect and condescension" that characterises the English writer's attitude towards his Irish counterpart, and the desire of Irish writers to "avail themselves of the hospitality of English readers" but also "maintain the refuge of difference against the day when the critical going gets rough".³⁵ In view of Foster's acute exposé of some of these inconsistencies, "concentrated" in Northern Ireland, a place "geographically Irish but constitutionally British",³⁶ it is perhaps surprising to find criticisms of Heaney recycled on the grounds which Foster points to as fallacious. Antony Easthope's attempted demolition job on Heaney and the English empirical tradition risks collapsing distinctions between English poetry and poetry in English - indeed, it has to collapse such distinctions for the analysis to work. The only fundamental problem he perceives which needs to be overcome in that tradition in order to "continue the series which runs: Shakespeare and Milton and Wordsworth and...Hardy and...Seamus Heaney" is modernism.³⁷ (*Pace* Yeats?) On one level, he objects to the way in which Heaney has been read; Heaney is thus the victim of a critical "conspiracy" that wants to place "an old-fashioned poetic empiricism" at the heart of the English canon.³⁸ But Easthope's

³⁵ *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991)

61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Antony Easthope, "How Good is Seamus Heaney?," *English* 46.184 (Spring 1997): 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 35.

final judgement on Heaney is that he is a “backward-looking Neo-Georgian” (shades of Stan Smith’s criticism of Mahon here), and that for British culture to honour him “is not a symptom of vitality”.³⁹ Heaney’s Northern Irish background means that his “pastoralism could make a claim to political discourse”, but for Easthope, “[t]errible as the situation has been in Northern Ireland, it has staged something backward-looking and atavistic, not a genuinely contemporary politics [*sic*]”.⁴⁰ Since “things have moved on” elsewhere in the world, Heaney can draw on the subject matter of Northern Ireland, can “sound very serious and authoritative without treading on anyone’s toes”.⁴¹ The confusion of Easthope’s argument is that it is an argument about reception, about canon-building that also, and finally, blames the poet: Heaney is atavistic and backward-looking, therefore the Establishment is to be blamed for praising him; his atavism is itself symptomatic of his place of origin. The alleged Northern Ireland “timewarp” rears its head again.

In effect, both those involved in the English praise-fest, and those, like Easthope, who criticise it, ignore some of the contexts and implications of Heaney’s work in order to accommodate (or condemn) him, but thereby lay him open to the charge of “atavism”, robbing Peter to pay Paul in the placing, or displacing, of him in certain versions of the canon.⁴² If Northern Ireland is perceived as atavistic and backward-looking, this is an indictment, not of the place (or, consequently, of its poets), but of an attitude which assumes itself, its politics, and its literary developments to be a quantifiable “norm” against which atavism can be recognised. To connect Heaney’s aesthetic with the Great War poets is not to suggest that Northern Ireland’s culture, along with its politics, would look more at home in 1914 than 1997. Rather it is to illustrate that, although Heaney relates his dilemma, his search for “images and symbols

³⁹ Ibid. 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 30.

⁴¹ Ibid. 30.

⁴² The charge of conservatism which may be brought against Heaney differs from that of atavism, in that it has less to do with style, the New Critical idiom, the anti-modernist empirical preoccupations, the born-again Romanticism and the political nothing-saying that Easthope (and others) object to (or admire), than with the form of political “saying” and the implications of a world-view that many, notably American, critics find radical and forward-looking and others find static, or resistant to change.

adequate to our predicament”⁴³ to the First World War poets (and in that sense, neo-Georgianism should not be a derogatory term), and although Northern Ireland still confronts unresolved political questions stemming from the Great War era, neither of these factors in themselves warrants a charge of anachronism, in terms of literature or politics. On the contrary, Paul Fussell demonstrates that the Great War has permeated modern memory to the extent that it is often impossible to conceive of experience in terms *other* than those brought about by the Great War. To look backwards can be a way of looking forwards. As in the case of Mahon, the call for Heaney to produce an adequate war poetry, to come up with something “new” in a time of crisis, may be where the only anachronism lies.

Like Longley, Heaney has linked an imagined Great War landscape to his perception of Ulster, and has done so on two different, but interdependent levels: first, by “borrowing” Great War imagery in order to construct his own Ulster landscape; second, and more importantly, by utilising Great War landscapes and terminology as metaphors for the condition of poetry, and the poet, in the Northern Ireland Troubles. The purpose here, then, is not so much to question the “adequacy” of Heaney’s response to the Troubles, but to consider, first, how effectively the Great War functions as a metaphor for Heaney’s own engagement with that question, and second, to explore some of the broader implications behind the use of the metaphor as Heaney develops his own “Apology for Poetry”. A highly self-conscious poet, even when that self-consciousness is transmuted into the mystical, the epiphanic, Heaney reveals a more acute insecurity than either Mahon or Longley about the pressure to respond to the Troubles in some tangible way, for poetry to make something happen, to legitimate its function in the world. At different points in his career, he gives way to this pressure, engages with it in order to try and transcend it, or transcends it entirely on his own terms. Through the various mutations of Heaney’s poetry, the Great War metaphor functions as a kind of barometer, measuring self-doubt, crisis, resolution, and the Great War poets, particularly Owen, as a means of evaluating a poetics of responsibility.

⁴³ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* 56.

II

Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*,⁴⁴ is littered with Great War debris. The imagery is less prevalent in *Wintering Out*, but intensified when it does appear by its connection to an Owen-esque aesthetic questioning. In *North*,⁴⁵ the First World War is not accommodated in Heaney's mythologised view of history, his claimed discovery of "befitting emblems of adversity", though, as will be seen, it works as a subtext to the movement of that volume. By the time of *Field Work*,⁴⁶ the War is again a focal point for Heaney, (and it is only in this volume that he explicitly approaches the subject of Irish involvement in the Great War⁴⁷). After *Field Work*, the Great War largely disappears as a subject or metaphor for poetry, or as a way of "explaining" Northern Ireland. Side by side with this development in the poetry is Heaney's developing conception, in his prose criticism, of the Great War aesthetic as exemplified by Wilfred Owen, and his growing consciousness of the importance of Eastern European poets, notably Osip Mandelstam, gradually replacing Owen *et al* as dominating influences. One might, therefore, risk the suggestion that as Heaney finds, in the 1980s, a point of resolution in his criticism about the function of poetry, particularly in relation to the Northern Irish situation, he ceases to engage, in the poetry itself, with the earlier war that had originally both sparked and grounded his aesthetic questioning.

Death of a Naturalist, Thomas Foster points out, does not contain "poetry for agrarian sentimentalists". It "testifies throughout to the small-scale violence of rural life".⁴⁸ Heaney's early poems mark out a difference between pastoral and what might be described as "country sentiment": the former has the capacity to challenge or subvert because it sees the landscape itself as under threat, bound within limits, and defined only

⁴⁴ (London: Faber, 1966) All subsequent references for quotations from this volume appear in the body of the text as (DN, page number).

⁴⁵ (London: Faber, 1975) All subsequent references for quotations from this volume appear in the body of the text as (N, page number).

⁴⁶ (London: Faber, 1979) All subsequent references for quotations from this volume appear in the body of the text as (FW, page number).

⁴⁷ In "In Memoriam: Francis Ledwidge". See Ch. 5, 179-182 above.

⁴⁸ Foster, *Seamus Heaney* 14.

through awareness of its “other”. As Stallworthy notes, the poems “praised for their loving evocation of the natural world...abound in images of man-made violence”.⁴⁹ Heaney, attempting retrospectively to account for the proliferation of military metaphors in that volume, writes:

Denis Donoghue probably got to the heart of the matter when he suggested, in a review, that I had seen too many war films when I was a youngster. But two other explanations occur to me (for I was not conscious of planting mines at the time). First, that Ted Hughes’s poetry was a strong influence in releasing me, and the habit of explosive diction may have been caught from him. And second - a more tentative, perhaps mystifying thought - when I set about a poem in those days, I was tensed and triggered within myself. I usually wrote at a sitting and generated a charge within me: the actual writing was an intense activity, battened down. So maybe that state reflected itself in the diction and imagery.⁵⁰

The Yeatsian sense of creativity he describes, of energy reined down, elevates the use of such imagery to the mystical, even the prophetic - the “slightly aggravated young Catholic male part”⁵¹ of Heaney anticipating, unwittingly, the war-torn landscape of the future, with writing itself as a kind of military activity that pre-dates conflict. Heaney’s first explanation, concerning the influence of Hughes, is limited: the centrality of the First World War to Hughes’s aesthetic vision makes slightly too easy the view that Heaney merely picked up elements of style and imagery, and applied them, randomly and unconsciously, to farming life in Co. Derry. His second verges on the inexplicable.

The “truth” is perhaps somewhere in between. Neil Corcoran writes that:

...some of Hughes’s stylistic devices are obviously a direct, indeed an overwhelming influence, on some of the poems of *Death of a Naturalist*: on the trick of eliding title into first line in “The Diviner” and “Trout”; on the

⁴⁹ Jon Stallworthy, “The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney,” *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert Garratt (New York: G.K. Hall; London: Prentice Hall International, 1995) 175.

⁵⁰ Seamus Heaney, “To Jon Stallworthy,” 6 Mar. 1980, quoted in Stallworthy, “The Poet as Archaeologist,” 176.

⁵¹ Seamus Heaney, “Unhappy and at Home,” interview by Seamus Deane, *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, ed. Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982) 66. In this interview, Heaney says that he initially attempted to face the Northern sectarian problem, then “this went underground and I became very influenced by Hughes and one part of my temperament took over: the private county Derry childhood part of myself rather than the slightly aggravated young Catholic male part” 66. He separates here - the Hughes influence, the aggravated male - what he later offers to Stallworthy, in a slightly different form, as two explanations for the same phenomenon.

almost absurd range of military metaphors in "Trout" itself...and on the similar metaphors and portentously over-insistent anthropomorphisms in "Turkeys Observed"...These poems have their eyes so eagerly trained on *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*...that trout and cow and turkeys disappear unrecognizably into pale imitation and pastiche.⁵²

It is, however, he continues, "possible to feel...that something more subtle and complex has been learnt from Hughes in 'Digging'".⁵³ While not disagreeing with this, it is also worth noting that those stylistic devices Heaney has absorbed have something to do with the preoccupations that dominate later collections, notably *Wintering Out* and *North*, where they are used to greater effect. Heaney inherits, at least partly from Ted Hughes, a sense of landscape as something forever tainted and violated by the wars of the twentieth century, a landscape which acts as conscience and custodian of memory.

Ted Hughes, describing his home ground, writes:

Everything in West Yorkshire is slightly unpleasant. Nothing ever quite escapes into happiness. The people are not detached enough from the stone, as if they were only half-born from the earth, and the graves are too near the surface. A disaster seems to hang around in the air there for a long time. I can never escape the impression that the whole region is in mourning for the First World War.⁵⁴

This perspective is not one that Heaney adapts with unqualified success in *Death of a Naturalist*. In that volume, Heaney attempts to formulate an aesthetic that, obliquely, connects him to the role of soldier-poet, but without being clear what kind of war he is fighting. He turns his home ground into a Great War battlefield of sorts in order to construct an image of the self as embattled poet, but the internal struggle, such as it is, does not really justify the framework. From the initial connection, in "Digging", of soldier with poet, pen with gun (*DN*, 1), Heaney moves into a world which at times looks like Co. Derry crossed with Passchendaele: the "flax-dam festered...rotted...weighted down by huge sods", frogs "[p]oised like mud-grenades" ("Death of a Naturalist", *DN*, 3-4)); "an armoury / Of farmyard implements", "great blind rats" ("The Barn", *DN*, 5); "large pottery bombs" ("Churning Day", *DN*, 9); the "Trout...a fat gun-

⁵² Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Quoted in Keith Sagar, ed., *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1983) 10.

barrel" ("Trout", *DN*, 26), the imagined drowned victims of "Waterfall"; "bombarded by the empty air" ("Storm on the Island" *DN*, 38). There are more rats in this book than in most Great War memoirs. They function as the focus of childhood and sexual fears - "This terror, cold, wet-furred, small-clawed" - which are overcome en route to adulthood: "I stared him out....I walked on and crossed the bridge" ("An Advancement of Learning", *DN*, 7). But it is also the case that it is probably now impossible to put a rat in a poem without evoking an imagined memory of war: the rat has come to represent the survival of the barbaric in a "civilized" world, a result partly of the fact that it was, in the First World War, the only tangible enemy the soldier, in his fight for "civilization" ever saw.⁵⁵ The poet, pen (gun) in hand, undergoes pseudo trench-trials.

The Great War metaphor is at its most extreme and its most ineffective in "Dawn Shoot". The early morning shooting expedition becomes a First World War "over the top" dawn attack scenario:

Clouds ran their wet mortar, plastered the daybreak
 Grey...
 ...
 ...A corncrake challenged
 Unexpectedly like a hoarse sentry
 And a snipe rocketed away on reconnaissance.
 Rubber-booted, belted, tense as two parachutists,
 We climbed the iron gate and dropped
 Into the meadow's six acres of broom, gorse and dew.

A sandy bank, reinforced with coiling roots,
 Faced you, two hundred yards from the track.
 Snug on our bellies behind a rise of dead whins,
 Our ravenous eyes getting used to the greyness,
 We settled, soon had the holes under cover.
 ...
 The cock would be sounding reveille
 In seconds.

(*DN*, 16-17)

⁵⁵ Heaney's rats are also Orwellian. "Of all the horrors in the world", Winston Smith exclaims, "a rat!.... For several moments he had had the feeling of being back in a nightmare which had recurred from time to time throughout his life. It was always very much the same. He was standing in front of a wall of darkness, and on the other side of it there was something unendurable, something too dreadful to be faced." George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949 (London: Penguin, 1989) 151.

Although the poem deploys its imagery with some fidelity to the details of an original dawn “push” - the sentry, the snipe(r), the barbed wire (“coiling roots”), shell holes, funk-holes, the tense moments waiting for the signal to attack, the lines diminishing at the countdown - it does not rework the imagery either to illuminate the poetic process, or to cast new light on the events it describes, and is, in the final analysis, factitious. But it is noteworthy partly because, as will be explored later, it experiments with an idea used to greater effect in “Exposure” (*North*), partly because it illustrates more comprehensively than the other poems in Heaney’s first volume his indebtedness not just to Ted Hughes, but also to Wilfred Owen. Heaney’s Great War allusions are, in part, drawn from Hughes - whose first collection is a book preoccupied with memory of that war⁵⁶ - but “Dawn Shoot” shows Owen to be the figure standing behind Hughes. The lines quoted above owe something to Owen’s “Exposure”:

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey.

...

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses...⁵⁷

though they lack the insistent questioning, the irony, and the pastoral subversion that inform Owen’s poem.

The outbreak in 1968-9 of the current Troubles in Northern Ireland triggers that questioning for Heaney. His second collection, *Door into the Dark*, published in 1969, is, in many ways, a continuation of *Death of a Naturalist*, its title indicating its role as sequel to the earlier collection, whose final poem, “Personal Helicon”, states “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (*DN*, 44). But between 1969 and 1972,

⁵⁶ Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber, 1957). A number of poems in this volume address the Great War directly, notably “Bayonet Charge” (51), “Six Young Men” (54-55), “Griefs for Dead Soldiers” (52-53). Others are permeated by a Great War “landscape”, “clay that clutches...each step to the ankle / With the habit of the dogged grave”, (“The Hawk in the Rain” 11); “the sun / Orange, red, red erupted” (“The Horses” 15); “the skyline a grimace” (“Wind” 40) - cf. Owen’s “the whole sky burned / With fury” in “Spring Offensive,” *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) 169.

⁵⁷ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 162.

when the poems which comprise *Wintering Out* were written, the resurgence of violence in the North gives a new dimension to the work in that it brings to the surface the “seared conscience” which Heaney has spent his subsequent career trying to appease. He attributes to the poet an extra responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland (as revealed in his comments to Thomas Foster quoted earlier - “in the North of Ireland, I think the answer is yes”; no claims are made for those writing outside that framework), even as he simultaneously resists what he later describes as the “expectation that you would speak for your own crowd, your own ‘tradition’...using that chance to air grievances and so forth”.⁵⁸ In the 1974 essay “Feeling into Words”, discussing the outbreak of violence in August 1969, Heaney writes that:

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. I do not mean liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another...I do not mean public celebration or execrations of resistance or atrocity - although there is nothing necessarily unpoetic about such celebration, if one thinks of Yeats’s “Easter 1916”. I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.⁵⁹

This is the first, and most explicit articulation of the notion of adequacy upon which Heaney is still brooding twenty years later in *The Redress of Poetry*.⁶⁰ “[O]ur predicament” is that of the people, caught up in a violent struggle, and also that of the poet who is both of the people and seeking a perspective beyond communal identity. It is a restatement of the desire for a contented duality, for soul and sense (art and life) to lie down together. Owen and Sassoon, perhaps even more than Yeats, are precursors in this by reason of circumstances. “One cannot be a good soldier and a good poet at the

⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, “Calling the Tune,” interview by Tom Adair, *Linen Hall Review* 6.2 (Autumn, 1989): 5.

⁵⁹ *Preoccupations* 56-57.

⁶⁰ See particularly the final essay in that volume, “Frontiers of Writing”. Heaney writes: “Seferis...found in [poetry] an adequate response to conditions in the world at a moment when the world was in crisis and Greece *in extremis*. And that idea of poetry as an answer, and the idea of an answering poetry as a responsible poetry...that...has been one of my constant themes.” 191.

same time", Sassoon writes.⁶¹ Nevertheless, he expresses the desire to be a good soldier, "to get a good name in the Battalion for the sake of poetry and poets", to "let people see that poets can fight as well as anybody else".⁶² Owen too outlines a dual role for himself:

I came out in order to help these boys - directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first.⁶³

Both make only tentative claims for their achievements as poets; both leave the aesthetic in a state of permanent instability; and yet both admit that one of the reasons for participating in the war is to enable that poetry. In Owen's case particularly, the poetry is in the apology for poetry that the war provokes.

That sensibility - a self-reflexive and self-critical rather than self-indulgent questioning - appears in *Wintering Out*. If Ted Hughes's sense of England as a mass grave for First World War victims does not translate effectively into Heaney's early perceptions of Ulster, the later view of a troubled Northern Ireland that evokes memories of the Western Front is more effective: it is a way of explaining Northern Ireland to the outside world, at a time when some of the horrors of the troubles equalled scenes associated with the Great War, in their barbarity if not in their death toll.⁶⁴ It is also to follow the tradition of explaining one war in terms of another. As in *Death of a Naturalist*, the poet is again venturing out into a war-torn landscape, but in *Wintering Out* that landscape functions to contextualise the poet's dilemma in the face of atrocities.

Eric J. Leed writes that for veterans of the Great War, the war experience, "through the metaphors derived from it, became something that could encompass everything". He goes on to suggest that "any claustrophobic situation, be it political,

⁶¹ Siegfried Sassoon *Diaries 1915-1918*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983) 271.

⁶² Ibid. 51, 53.

⁶³ Wilfred Owen, "To Susan Owen," 4/5 Oct. 1918, *Collected Letters* 580.

⁶⁴ The death toll from the Troubles rose each year from 1969, with 1972 the bloodiest year of the conflict thus far - 467 deaths, and over 10,000 shootings. After a bombing in Belfast in July 1972, some of the bodies of the victims were so badly dismembered, they had to be "swept up and collected in plastic bags". Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1993* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993) 54, 57.

sexual, or psychic, can call up the image of the trench labyrinth".⁶⁵ Once those war images have been called up, or have imposed themselves on a situation, a modern consciousness makes a judgement on a contemporary situation through ironic contrast or comparison with the events and images of the First World War. There are certain Great War images which now carry so much cultural baggage they inevitably conjure up what Vernon Scannell describes as a "deathscape". His poem, "The Great War", deliberately, and conveniently, encapsulates most of them: the "grey militia" matching the grey landscape, "shells" opening "fans / Of smoke and earth", "rosettes of fire" in the sky, "Candles in dug-outs, / Duckboards, mud and rats", "Crosses and flares, tormented wire...crimson flowers". Everybody knows what this landscape looks like without ever having seen it: the poet remembers "not the war I fought in / But the one called Great / Which ended in a sepia November / Four years before my birth".⁶⁶

Descriptions of the Western Front have become parallels for the human condition. Even at the time of the First World War, people were puzzled by the fact that the "narrow...strip of ground" on which the war was being fought seemed "too narrow for its gigantic significance".⁶⁷ That strip of ground represents in post-war imaginations the clash of past and future, the development from innocence to experience, anti-pastoral versus pastoral, the imposition of technology in the most ruthless way imaginable on the natural world. A violated landscape is a theme which occurs again and again in literature of the Great War. It is not an idea which originates with that war. Rather it indicates a general tendency, when thinking of war, to think in terms of a suffering landscape, whereas the reality, of course, is that people not the land are bleeding and dying. Suffering is projected onto the land as something which transcends time, which bears scars and memories long after any veterans have died. But what is peculiar to the Great War, and what lends it particularly to this kind of expression, is the visual absence of any people on the battlefield. As Leed points out, "[t]he invisibility of

⁶⁵ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 76-77.

⁶⁶ Vernon Scannell, "The Great War," *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence*, ed. Martin Stephen (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 311-12.

⁶⁷ Herbert Weissner, quoted in Leed, *No Man's Land* 132.

the enemy, and the retirement of troops underground, destroyed any notion that war was a spectacle of contending humanity”.⁶⁸ The war represents the birth of the modern age: its battlefields also provide images of the worst possibilities of that modern age, images which can seemingly be used *in perpetuum* in the quest for understanding the new age engendered by the technological advances of the twentieth century. The war landscape symbolises the ambivalence informing perceptions of almost any landscape - literal or psychic: it is both one’s home and the source of a hidden, ever-present threat; it is, paradoxically, a landscape destroyed by machinery in the interests of what is often seen as a kind of pastoral quest - as Edmund Blunden puts it, “[g]reenness...was our dream scenery. There was to have been green country on the victorious far side of the Somme battlefield.”⁶⁹

The ambivalence is articulated by David Jones in the Preface to *In Parenthesis*: “Even while we watch the boatman mending his sail”, he writes, “the petroleum is hurting the sea. So did we in 1916 sense a change.”⁷⁰ If, as Fussell suggests, “the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral”,⁷¹ one moment does not exist anymore without awareness of the other informing the vision. And if the pastoral concept of “home” is designed to counterbalance the effect of wars fought on someone else’s ground (as is usually the case in English history), the Northern Irish poet would appear to have an almost impossible task confronting him or her: the landscape of war is also the landscape of home; the front-line is perpetually shifting and always intangible. But the Great War is also the setting where landscapes of peace and war merge: Blunden, in *Undertones of War*, slips in and out of pastoral, in and out of the front-line. Trenches themselves are pastoral or “not so pastoral”; a “pretty landscape” can be noticed amidst a bombardment of shells. Equally, the pastoral retreat away from the front line is, for Blunden in 1917, “visited at night by aircraft well accustomed to the art of murdering sleep if not life”. Slipping into the present tense and

⁶⁸ *No Man’s Land* 19.

⁶⁹ *Undertones of War* 1928 (London: Penguin, 1982) 143.

⁷⁰ David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 1937 (London: Faber, 1963) ix.

⁷¹ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 231.

writing ten years after the war is over, he continues “[o]ut of the line was out of the line in 1916, but we are older now”.⁷² If war leads initially to an idealisation of home, return home often leads to an idealisation of at least some aspects of war. What remains to be idealised in the end is neither front nor home, but what a survivor of the Great War called the “rainbow of yearning” between the two,⁷³ a space which can only be aesthetic or psychic.

The crossover between a sense of a landscape of war and, simultaneously, of pastoral (home) informs much of Heaney’s 1970s poetry. In the sequence “A Northern Hoard”, he no longer has his eyes “eagerly trained” on Hughes’s first two books, (although he has absorbed influences from *Wodwo*⁷⁴), but is engaged on a quest to find his own apology for poetry through negotiation with the conflict in which Hughes is also imaginatively absorbed. In the first poem in the sequence, “Roots”, “the fault is opening”, the inner space is invaded by “gunshot, siren and clucking gas” even as they are resisted. To resist violence from the outside is also to perpetrate an act of violence against the self, to be culpable in violating the land even in departing it. The poem disallows an easy answer to the question of responsibility:

We petrify or uproot now.

I’ll dream it for us before dawn
When the pale sniper steps down
And I approach the shrub.
I’ve soaked by moonlight in tidal blood

A mandrake, lodged human fork,
Earth sac, limb of the dark;
And I wound its damp smelly loam
And stop my ears against the scream.
(*WO*, 39)

The poet is caught between, on the one hand, the fear of rigid, archaic postures, the acceptance that might seem to condone - petrification - and on the other, the potentially

⁷² *Undertones of War* 206.

⁷³ Quoted in Leed, *No Man’s Land* 189.

⁷⁴ Ted Hughes, *Wodwo* (London: Faber, 1967). Of noticeable influence is the First World War sequence “Out”, as well as “The Warriors of the North” and “Heptonstall”.

fatal effects of uprooting the self, implicit in the mandrake's scream.⁷⁵ The next poem in the sequence, "No Man's Land", articulates the same dilemma, the same crisis of conscience: "I deserted...Must I crawl back now...". It visualises Derry in terms of a preconceived image of No Man's Land in the Great War: it is the place where the poet must crawl "abroad between / shred-hung wire and thorn / to confront my smeared doorstep" (WO, 40). Pastoral and mechanical are compressed into the same image here, playing on the juxtaposition of the two in First World War literature, where "iron thickets"⁷⁶ existed on either side of No Man's Land. The sense of helplessness characteristic of those caught in the ubiquitous mud of the First World War battlefields relates to the speaker's position as a poet in Northern Ireland:

Why do I unceasingly
arrive late to condone
infected sutures
and ill-knit bone?
(WO, 40)

As "spirochete" he is also self-accusing; a part of, perhaps even a cause of, the infection he arrives late to condone. (The image also looks forward to the "long-haired...wood-kerne" of "Exposure" in *North*.) He is indicted, the embattled tone of the poem suggests, and indicts himself, for a failure to act.

In "Stump", the self-questioning reaches its unanswerable climax:

I am riding to plague again.
Sometimes under a sooty wash
From the grate in the burnt-out gable
I see the needy in a small pow-wow.
What do I say if they wheel out their dead?
I'm cauterized, a black stump of home.
(WO, 41)

The ambivalence of the landscape becomes the ambivalence of his position in that landscape: the poet himself is the wounded pastoral, a "black stump" of war, or, as in

⁷⁵ Cf. Mahon's "The Last of the Fire Kings" with its choice either "to die their creature and be thankful" or "Break with tradition and / Die by my own hand". *The Snow Party* (London: OUP, 1975) 9-10.

⁷⁶ Blunden, *Undertones of War* 159.

the poem, of "home".⁷⁷ The poem also looks back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - the plague, bringing out the dead, the burnings. Its imagery owes something to Ted Hughes's "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar", where:

...she seized
And knotted him into this blazing shape
In their eyes, as if such could have cauterized
The trust they turned towards him, and branded on
Its stump her claim, to outlaw question.⁷⁸

The question, in "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar" is how events themselves validate words - not so much "what do I say?" but "how will I be believed?". Heaney's feeling of helplessness in "Stump" puts him in the opposite position to the earlier martyr, even though both are perceived as victims. The poet in "Stump" falls into the "as if such could have cauterized" that in Hughes's poem is derided. Farrar's transcendence of horror at the end of the poem, the triumph of the doctrine preached - "out of his eyes, / Out of his mouth, fire like a glory broke..." - has no equivalent in "A Northern Hoard". The martyr is burned but unsilenced; the speaker of Heaney's poem is effectively silenced, "cauterized", rendered numb and powerless, freed from the "infection" of the previous poem perhaps, but helpless as a result. He is, in a way, shell-shocked into insensitivity by the events around him, with an echo of Owen's well-known comments: "My senses are charred. I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not. I don't take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write Deceased over their letters."⁷⁹ The sequence ends in confusion about the past, the future, and the poet's role, as he faces a desolate landscape irreversibly changed and irreparably damaged by war and revolution⁸⁰:

What could strike a blaze

⁷⁷ Cf. Mahon's "last stubborn growth...Like a burnt-out angel" in "The Return" (retitled "Going Home") *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: OUP, 1979) 98-100.

⁷⁸ "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar". Hughes's epigraph to the poem reads: "Burned by Bloody Mary's men at Caermarthen. 'If I flinch from the pain of the burning, believe not the doctrine that I have preached.' (His words on being chained to the stake.)" *The Hawk in the Rain* 58-59.

⁷⁹ Wilfred Owen, "To Siegfried Sassoon," 10 Oct. 1918, *Collected Letters* 581.

⁸⁰ Edna Longley suggests this poem might be described as Heaney's "Easter 1916", although, she notes, "his before-and-after contrast displays little even of Yeats's qualified excitement". *Poetry in the Wars* 145.

From our dead igneous days?

Now we squat on cold cinder,
Red-eyed, after the flames' soft thunder

And our thoughts settle like ash.
We face the tundra's whistling brush

With new history, flint and iron,
Cast-offs, scraps, nail, canine.
("Tinder", *WO*, 43-44)

III.

Robert Buttel's study of Heaney's poetry, which pre-dates publication of *North*, notes the impatience of reviewers with *Wintering Out*: "they want Heaney to 'move on' to what they see as more urgent subjects".⁸¹ Stephen Spender's review of *Wintering Out* assumes that Heaney's poetry will, in the future, "enlarge" from "deep personal feelings" to "a much wider subject matter, especially since he comes from Northern Ireland, and the Irish situation must be boiling in him"⁸² (and if it is not, such reviews are designed to make it so). Desmond Fennel suggests that with *North*, in 1975, Heaney "delivered the 'war book' that London was waiting for".⁸³ It was greeted, Blake Morrison writes, with "an almost audible sigh of relief that at last a poetry of stature had emerged from the 'troubles'".⁸⁴ Ciaran Carson reiterates this feeling - "everyone was anxious that *North* should be a great book" - though he qualifies it - "when it turned out that it wasn't, it was treated as one anyway...".⁸⁵

Elmer Andrews notes that there are two temptations for a writer in wartime: the first is to become "a mouthpiece for opinion and dogma"; the second is "to exploit a situation of brutal factionalism for a kind of aestheticism which the poet indulges in for its own sake and without committing himself". "In the poems in *North*", he concludes,

⁸¹ Robert Buttel, *Seamus Heaney* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP; London: Associated University Presses, 1975) 69.

⁸² Quoted in Buttel, *Seamus Heaney* 69.

⁸³ *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No.1* 27.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Fennel, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* 27.

⁸⁵ Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?," rev. of *North*, by Seamus Heaney, *Honest Ulsterman* 50 (1975): 186.

“there are times when Heaney succumbs to both these temptations”.⁸⁶ In *North*, Heaney comes close to claiming he has found “befitting emblems of adversity” from P.V. Glob’s *The Bog People*, that he has something to say “if they wheel out their dead”. The victims of “ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess”, he writes, “blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggle”. They create for him an “archetypal pattern”.⁸⁷ He offers, Graves-fashion, a kind of “romantic mythology” as an explanation of Northern Irish violence. It is a mythology which, unlike Graves’s, has proved extremely contentious, and has attracted a vast amount of critical attention, both positive and negative.⁸⁸ That debate is not primarily the issue here, but Heaney’s indebtedness to the systems both Yeats and Graves formulated in wartime does shed light on his purpose in constructing an “archetypal pattern”, and on the reasons for his only very limited success. Yeats’s *A Vision* and Graves’s *The White Goddess* are, as discussed earlier, mythologies designed to accommodate conflict and division, in the poet and in the world. Yeats projects his “system” as a symbolic one, a way of ordering experience not dictating it, and thus retains a high degree of flexibility in the way in which it appears in the poetry. Graves, on the other hand, derives flexibility from the denial of symbolic status altogether. His claim to the actuality of the Goddess insists, by default, on arbitrariness: to acknowledge the system as constructed might restrict freedom; to avow its status as the only truth and the only story is to project all other freedoms as illusory. In *North*, Heaney tends to fall between these two stools. In “Kinship”, the speaker “stand[s] at the edge of centuries / Facing a goddess”, “the goddess swallows / our love and terror” (*N*, 42, 45); in “Strange Fruit” he outstares “What had begun to feel like reverence” (*N*, 39). In effect, he adopts a kind of Yeatsian symbolism which he then attempts to treat with

⁸⁶ Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 82.

⁸⁷ *Preoccupations* 57-58.

⁸⁸ See note 8 above.

Graves-style devotion.⁸⁹ He is consistent only in his indecisiveness about whether he is sacrificing or sacrificed, bridegroom or bride, archetypal product or liberal humanist.

"Punishment" encapsulates this indecisiveness. The poem has become, as Michael Allen points out, "a *locus classicus* of Heaney criticism".⁹⁰ Its fluctuation between empathy and voyeurism translates into passive collusion in the atrocities it simultaneously wants to condemn: "I can feel...I can see...I almost love...I who have stood dumb...who would connive...yet understand..." (N, 37-38). Edna Longley asks of this poem: "can the poet run with the hare...and hunt with the hounds?".⁹¹ "Yes", Stanfield argues, praising the "double perspective" of the poem, its refusal to privilege "the voice of the individual reason over that of the community's instinct, instead letting these two voices co-exist, interact, contend without declaring a victor".⁹² If this were a valid reading of the end of the poem, Stanfield's response would carry some weight, but for Longley the poem's "artistic...fence-sitting" is unacceptable precisely because of the absence of this interaction and contention: "[t]he conclusion" of the poem, she suggests, "states, rather than dramatises, what should be profound self-division".⁹³ Running with the hare and hunting with the hounds is, of course, exemplified in the life of Wilfred Owen, who made poetry out of condemning the atrocities of a war that he also participated in. Or, as Heaney puts it, "[h]e connived in what he deplored so that he could deplore what he connived in",⁹⁴ (although "connive" is perhaps not wholly appropriate to a junior officer, and has rather more to do with Heaney's self-perceptions at the end of "Punishment"). It is a contradiction apparent in Owen's correspondence,

⁸⁹ Like Yeats, he is, for a time, seduced by the mythology he constructs. But also, like Yeats, his "reason" recovers (though he finds no use for the "mythology" as a purely symbolic system). "[A]t that time", Heaney says, "I was, I suppose, in the grip of what is a romantic mythology...and then a moment came when I got a salutary reminder of what I was into....One afternoon we went across the waters of a famous clearwater lake to an island which had the most entrancing Byzantine churches...[A Danish poet] said to me 'This is you, isn't it? you aren't really black bogs and sacrificial Iron Age creatures.' In a way he was right." "Between North and South: Poetic Detours," interview by Richard Kearney, *Visions of Europe: Conversations on the Legacy and Future of Europe* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1992) 84.

⁹⁰ Introduction, *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen, 17n.

⁹¹ *Poetry in the Wars* 154.

⁹² Paul Scott Stanfield, "Facing North Again: Polyphony, Contention" 138, 143.

⁹³ *Poetry in the Wars* 154.

⁹⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1987) xv.

as well as in the poetry: "When I looked back and saw the ground all crawling and wormy with wounded bodies, I felt no horror at all, but only an immense exultation...";⁹⁵ "I lost all my earthly faculties and fought like an angel";⁹⁶ "Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms".⁹⁷ The poem which stands as a precursor to the divided loyalties Heaney attempts to expound in "Punishment" is Owen's "Strange Meeting", with its famous paradox: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend". But there is a fundamental difference between the sentiments of "Punishment" and the dilemma confronted by Owen every day in the trenches. In "Strange Meeting", the irony comes from the fact that the feeling of enmity is shown to be illusory even before the word "enemy" is mentioned; though the killing has taken place, Owen does not claim to "understand" killing as an underlying, somehow genuine impulse which has a validity of its own, or to excuse the life in the work. Heaney, on the other hand, later describes the "half-acknowledged supposition" underlying the mythologies of *North*, as "that the nativist, the barbaric, is as authentic if not more authentic than the civilised".⁹⁸ "Punishment" does not offer voices in contention. Instead, one is shown as a civilised veneer (false) imposed on the communal instinct which underlies it (true):

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

(*N*, 38)

(Consequently, the language is that of the tribe even as he claims to be dumb - "betraying" not betrayed, the ironically protective "cauled".)

⁹⁵ Wilfred Owen, "To Colin Owen," 14 May 1917, *Collected Letters* 458.

⁹⁶ Wilfred Owen, "To Susan Owen," 4/5 Oct. 1918, *Collected Letters* 580.

⁹⁷ Wilfred Owen, "To Susan Owen," ?16 May 1917, *Collected Letters* 461.

⁹⁸ "Between North and South: Poetic Detours," interview by Richard Kearney 84.

The critical attention devoted to the Bog/Viking element of the volume and Heaney's subsequent move away from those mythologies has perhaps detracted attention from the continued engagement of Heaney's aesthetic with the Great War; indeed, it is the revision of his approach to his war-poet predecessors, which begins in *North* and is consolidated through *Field Work*, that distinguishes the later from the earlier volumes as much as the abandonment of bog people. *North* marks the beginning of a process whereby Heaney commends Owen's aesthetic, but gradually distances it from his own understanding of an adequate poetry, qualifying Owen's achievement and setting up a different concept of what it is to be a "war poet" as it relates to himself and Ireland.

The landscape of *North*, like that of *Wintering Out*, is reminiscent of Great War battlefields, though in *North* the association is incidental rather than central. The poet is "skull-handler...smeller of rot" (*N*, 23), the land is a graveyard of drowned bodies, dead moles, a "skull-capped ground" (*N*, 24).⁹⁹ The volume itself moves from a kind of entrenchment, or collusion, to exposure and isolation. Much of what gives No Man's Land its mythical status in the Great War is the experience of going "over the top", the move from safe burial in the earth to exposure on the surface. In the famous push of 1 July 1916, "the innocent army fully attained the knowledge of good and evil".¹⁰⁰ Wilfred Owen, describing such an attack, writes: "There was an extraordinary exultation in the act of slowly walking forward, showing ourselves openly."¹⁰¹ It is an escape from the troglodyte world, a "door into the light", to borrow Heaney's phrase,¹⁰² in which the knowledge acquired seems to be understood most readily in sexual terms. Eksteins describes the soldier's experience as follows:

Physical nakedness is the first sensation. The body is now exposed, tense, expectant, awaiting direct violence upon it. Even if one is to follow the "creeping barrage"...of one's own artillery towards the enemy trenches, that first moment of exposure reduces him to innocence. "A man who stepped

⁹⁹ Cf. Blunden's description of Festubert: "At some points in the trench, bones pierced through their shallow burial, and skulls appeared like mushrooms." *Undertones of War* 25.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 29.

¹⁰¹ Wilfred Owen, "To Colin Owen," 14 May 1917, *Collected Letters* 458.

¹⁰² Quoted in Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 128.

out of the trenches at that moment and lived through has never in all the ensuing years faced such a climax," wrote a survivor.¹⁰³

Heaney's "Exposure" in the context of *North* in some ways parallels this movement; from being "cradled in the dark that wombed me...nurtured in every artery" of the earth, in "Antaeus" (*N*, 12), the poet ventures out, in "Exposure" to the surface. As with Wilfred Owen's "Exposure", the act of doing so has made of him an exile, has turned him into a tormented shadow of a former self. But it is worth noting that the opposite position is held by Heaney. Owen puts it as rejection or abandonment *by* the world: "Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed, - / We turn back to our dying."¹⁰⁴ In Heaney's "Exposure", the isolation comes from rejection *of* that world: "Escaped from the massacre". If the poet in Heaney's "Exposure" is initially reduced to innocence in exposure, "Taking protective colouring / From bole and bark", it is only because in that reduction he is then open to knowledge of "Every wind that blows" (*N*, 73). In the poem, Heaney's is, finally, a privileged individual position that translates Owen's experience of battle into his own, artistic terms. The early poem, "Dawn Shoot", is true to the details of a Great War experience, if not to the poet's experience; *North* reworks second-hand images of the Great War to help articulate the poet's wartime dilemma but does not simultaneously illuminate the Great War experience from the Northern Ireland perspective. Heaney is faithful to his perception of Northern Ireland, but not faithful to the past he trawls for images to convey that perception. Too often, he is unable to combine these two things - truth to the image from the past, and to the present context created in the poem by that image. The imaginatively powerful idea of exposure in the Great War is, in a way, the original fall reiterated, where the earth itself is cursed by the knowledge of evil attained.¹⁰⁵ The knowledge, with the First World War, as with the Fall, has been perceived as permanent because hereditary: "Never such innocence again", Larkin writes of the pre-war human condition.¹⁰⁶ And as

¹⁰³ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* 1989 (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1990) 141.

¹⁰⁴ "Exposure," *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 162.

¹⁰⁵ Genesis. 3.17. Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX: 780-85.

¹⁰⁶ Philip Larkin, "MCMXIV," *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and The Marvell Press, 1990) 127-28.

Ted Hughes puts it when contemplating the photograph of “Six Young Men” killed in the war:

To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One’s own body from its instant and heat.¹⁰⁷

The ending of Hughes’s poem serves to illustrate the fundamental difference between Heaney’s and Longley’s uses of the Great War. For Heaney, that war can be used to express his position and dilemma as poet; it is also an “image-bank” that helps him to articulate his vision of the Northern Irish landscape in the Troubles. For Longley, an imagined Great War landscape and engagement with the Great War poets do both these things, but also, as with Hughes and unlike Heaney, draw him back into history and serve to interpret the past in terms of the present as well as the other way round. The lack of historical imagination in Heaney’s treatment of the Great War means that, on the whole, it resonates in his Northern Ireland only as a metaphor for finding an “apology for poetry”.

If “Exposure” acknowledges, obliquely, that the poet will not follow the western soldier poet’s example, that he is not the “hero” whose “gift” is “Whirled for the desperate” (N, 72), it also marks the entrance of Mandelstam as an equally traumatised but more congenial replacement:

...I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs?

...
I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre...
(N, 73)

¹⁰⁷ “Six Young Men,” *The Hawk in the Rain* 54-55.

Tristia evokes the title of Mandelstam's second book of poems, which appeared in 1922 while he was still free to publish; "inner émigré" was the description of Mandelstam current in Moscow in the 1930s, at a time when "a writer with such a label could confidently suppose himself doomed".¹⁰⁸ Heaney's almost accusatory self-questioning followed by self-assessment in the poem is also reminiscent of Mandelstam:

Who am I? No forthright stonemason,
no roofer or shipbuilder:
I am a double dealer, with a double-dealing soul.
I am a friend of night, a pioneer of day.¹⁰⁹

IV.

Owen and Mandelstam embody, for Heaney, two kinds of response to violence, which start by negotiating, and end with the elision of one into the other.¹¹⁰ In *Field Work*, that elision is, at times, already apparent before its articulation in the prose criticism, most notably in *The Government of the Tongue*.¹¹¹ Heaney describes the shift from *North* to *Field Work* as "a shift in trust: a learning to trust melody, to trust art as reality".¹¹² The sequence of ten Glanmore sonnets at the heart of the volume attempts to establish that trust, to create a realm which cannot be violated, even if it is a realm perfected only in memory: "art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe..." (I, *FW*, 33); the desire "to raise / A voice...That might continue, hold, dispel, appease" (II, *FW*, 34).

¹⁰⁸ David McDuff, introduction, *Osip Mandelstam: Selected Poems*, trans. David McDuff, 1973 (Cambridge: Rivers Press, 1973) xi, xii. Neil Corcoran discusses the debt to Mandelstam in this poem, and suggests that Mandelstam in one of Stalin's camps may inform the "hero" figure imagined in an earlier stanza. (See Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 124-26). But in his later discussions of Mandelstam, it is the more elusive form of resistance Heaney finds in his aesthetic that he singles out for praise, rather than the anti-Stalinist epigram that sealed Mandelstam's fate in the long term, and put him in the position of David facing Goliath.

¹⁰⁹ Mandelstam, "Slate Pencil Ode," *Selected Poems* 85-87

¹¹⁰ Bernard O'Donoghue, in "Heaney's *Ars Poetica*: Mandelstam, Dante and *The Government of the Tongue*," *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 135-52, offers an illuminating discussion of the centrality of Mandelstam, and through him, Dante, to Heaney's aesthetic. He does not, however, mention the role of Owen in facilitating Heaney's use of Mandelstam, since he takes his discussion from a point after the negotiation and elision discussed in this chapter.

¹¹¹ In particular the Introduction to that collection of essays, "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker". Some of the ideas in this essay appeared in *Place and Displacement* in 1984 (see note 136 below).

¹¹² Quoted in Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 127.

Those moments are still phrased only as possibilities, a kind of wish-fulfilment: “the good life could be...” (I), “I...hoped” (II), “I...would crouch / Where small buds shoot...” (V, *FW*, 37). (That realm is later attained without tentativeness in the “Clearances” sonnet sequence of *The Haw Lantern*.¹¹³)

“*Field Works*” are “defensive or protective works, or temporary fortifications, made by an army to strengthen its position”.¹¹⁴ Oddly, the return to a more tranquil evocation of the natural world in *Field Work*, the renewed contact with nature outside the mythologies of *North*, and the foregrounding of Wordsworth’s influence, particularly in the Glanmore sonnets, have led to an over-emphasis of one aspect of a double-edged phrase, to the extent that Elmer Andrews perceives as inherent in the volume’s title “a conscious scaling down of Heaney’s vision. His imaginative parameters are now those of a field, not the international time-warps of *North*.”¹¹⁵ (The Return of the Naturalist?) But Heaney’s field is also, in a way, a field of war from which “respite” is gained only with difficulty (X, *FW*, 42). Sonnets VIII and IX look back to the division within the poet which begins in “A Northern Hoard”, an aspiration towards transcendence compromised by memory of war:

This morning when a magpie with jerky steps
Inspected a horse asleep beside the wood
I thought of dew on armour and carrion.
What would I meet, blood-boltered, on the road?
How deep into the woodpile sat the toad?
What welters through this dark hush on the crops?
(*FW*, 40)

More subtle, and reminiscent of the First World War, is the imagery pervading sonnet IX, where “a black rat / Sways on the briar” (*FW*, 41), with its connotation of “wire”. The “fault...opening” in “A Northern Hoard”, where there is “No Sanctuary” and no escape is revisited in this poem. As with “Roots”, it sets up an opposition between what is going on “out there” in the world, and inside for the individual. Unlike the earlier

¹¹³ (London: Faber, 1987)

¹¹⁴ E.C.Brewer and Ivor H. Evans, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 1970 (London: Wordsworth, 1994) 409.

¹¹⁵ *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 116.

poem, it translates this opposition into one between beauty and truth. But despite the “burnished bay tree at the gate”, there is not really an “out of the line” here, any more than in “A Northern Hoard”: “Did we come to the wilderness for this?...Blood on a pitch-fork...Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing” (*FW*, 41). Attuned to the implications of his imagery, the poet wonders “What is my apology for poetry?” (harking back to the question in “A Northern Hoard”, “What do I say if they wheel out their dead?”, but rephrasing it away from such specificity). He is, unconsciously or otherwise, echoing here, amongst other things, Owen’s “Apologia Pro Poemata Meo”. In that poem, Owen suggests that there is beauty in wartime, but that it would be compromised if it were used to ease conscience:

I have perceived much beauty
 In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
 Heard music in the silentness of duty;
 Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.

Nevertheless, except you share
 With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell
 Whose world is but the trembling of a flare
 And heaven but as the highway for a shell,

You shall not hear their mirth:
 You shall not come to think them well content
 By any jest of mine.¹¹⁶

It is this aspect of Owen’s aesthetic which Heaney, finally, resists, though he reformulates it prior to rejection. Osip Mandelstam is, as Corcoran notes, “a hidden presence” in the Glanmore sonnets.¹¹⁷ And Mandelstam becomes, for Heaney, a poet who, under difficult circumstances, attains a new kind of beauty in transcendence that Owen rejects, within which is implicit a new kind of freedom: “The reign of the four elements is favorable to us, / but free man has made a fifth...the three dimensions’ bonds are burst / the seas of all the world revealed.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 101-2.

¹¹⁷ *Seamus Heaney* 144. He notes the debt to Mandelstam’s poem, “Orioles are in the forest and in tonic verse / the length of vowels is the only measure...That day yawns like a caesura”. No. 20 in his first collection, *Stone*. *Osip Mandelstam: Selected Poems*, trans. David McDuff 41.

¹¹⁸ Mandelstam, “The Admiralty Building,” *Selected Poems* 39.

In *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney sets up a conflict of sorts between these two precursors, already implicit in his poetry, in order to be able to resolve it. The “opposition” is based on a slanted reading of Owen’s aesthetic, and on the deliberate polarisation of terms, in order to be able to “discover” afresh the middle ground as an arena at once subversive and radical but ultimately quite safe. “The artist”, he says elsewhere, “can refuse history as a category”: to do so is a “disruptive activity” because “[i]t is a refusal of the terms”.¹¹⁹ Heaney’s influential role as critic and self-critic does make it possible for him to set up the terms which he then “disruptively” refuses. Thus, in the introduction to *The Government of the Tongue*, he redefines “Art and Life” as “Song and Suffering”,¹²⁰ and in doing so polarises the two “as if”, Edna Longley points out, “history were only suffering and poetry were only song”.¹²¹ “[H]aving set up an antithesis rather than an antinomy (the aesthetic *versus* the empathetic)”, he then “bridges it with an oxymoron, ‘radical witness’, which tries to fuse the activist and the static-spectatorial”.¹²²

Owen and Mandelstam are similarly polarised. Pondering the dangers of “a complacency and an insulation from reality in some song and some art”, Heaney returns to the First World War and the example of Wilfred Owen:

it is from this moment in our century that radiant and unperturbed certitudes about the consonance between the true and the beautiful become suspect. The *locus classicus* for all this is in the life and poetry of Wilfred Owen....In a preface which would not see the light until after his own death...Owen affirmed that his poems would have nothing to do with this complacent, acceptable version of the beautiful which he contemptuously calls “Poetry”....His poems have the potency of human testimony, of martyr’s relics, so that any intrusion of the aesthetic can feel like impropriety. They so opt for truth that the beauty consideration is made to seem irrelevant....Wilfred Owen, and others like him in the trenches of Flanders, are among the first of a type of poet....in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed becomes necessarily integral with the act of writing itself. In...Owen...we find the impulse to elevate truth

¹¹⁹ “Between North and South: Poetic Detours,” interview by Richard Kearney 88.

¹²⁰ *The Government of the Tongue* xii.

¹²¹ Edna Longley, “The Aesthetic and the Territorial,” *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992) 77.

¹²² *Ibid.*

above beauty, to rebuke the sovereign claims which art would make for itself...¹²³

Against this “type of poet”, Heaney sets the example of Osip Mandelstam:

singing in the Stalinist night, affirming the essential humanism of the act of poetry itself against the inhuman tyranny which would have had him write odes not just to Stalin but to hydro-electric dams[?] As opposed to these prescribed and propagandist themes, the essential thing about lyric poetry, Mandelstam maintained, was its unlooked-for joy in being itself, and the essential thing for the lyric poet was therefore a condition in which he was in thrall to no party or programme, but truly and freely and utterly himself. Unlike Chekhov, who wrote on behalf of the prisoners explicitly, and unlike Owen, who had a messianic and socially redemptive message to impart, Mandelstam had no immediate social aim. *Utterance itself was self-justifying and creative, like nature....For him, obedience to poetic impulse was obedience to conscience; lyric action constituted radical witness....* [My italics] So if Owen sponsors an art which seems to rebuke beauty in favour of truth, Mandelstam, at an equally high price, sponsors all over again the Keatsian proposition that beauty *is* truth, truth beauty.¹²⁴

This essay has been quoted at some length because, in effect, it constitutes Heaney’s own apology for poetry which, cast in these terms, apparently leaves him in the enviable position of writing a responsible poetry which has no responsibilities, a Romantic (with a rather Yeatsian distaste for the industrial world) whose work is, by default, infused with the traumas of the twentieth century, and thus cannot be complacent or insulated.

But to reach this resolution, the opposition has to be faked. The First World War is, as Heaney notes, the point where the beauty-truth consonance, as it had been understood, is questioned, but it is also the point where, in the aesthetics of Owen and others, the synonymy of “beauty” and “truth” is itself a “truth” which becomes fully apparent, if retrospectively, perhaps for the first time. Hence, Rupert Brooke’s 1914 sonnets might appear to fall on the side of “beauty” if one is to separate the terms, but in fact what has made these poems “ugly”, or inadequate, to a later generation, is that they rely, as MacNeice points out, on a “falsehood to life”.¹²⁵ Ronald Sharp argues that what Keats means by beauty is “that which is life-affirming” and “consolatory”, and that “[s]ince metaphysical truth cannot be certainly known, this human truth, beauty, is really

¹²³ *The Government of the Tongue* xii, xiii, xiv, xvi, xviii.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* xix-xx.

¹²⁵ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 1941 (London: Faber, 1967) 29.

the only truth there is for man".¹²⁶ The "radical identification of beauty and truth that Keats makes at the end of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is to be taken quite literally once we understand that he is not referring to metaphysical categories",¹²⁷ and the real focus of the poem is not the tension between art and life, but "the function of art in life".¹²⁸ In this sense, Keats's famous statement that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" could be applied to Owen with the synonym "truth" inserted instead. Owen's draft preface may be seen, not as a radical departure from the Keats aesthetic, but as a restatement of it, a restatement necessary because of the transcendental associations traditionally drawn in Keatsian criticism. Of Graves and Sassoon he writes, "are they not already as many Keatses?".¹²⁹ For Owen, to tell the "truth" is to affirm the value of life, at a time when it was treated by the authorities as expendable commodity. Although his elegies, he claimed, were not intended to "console", in the sense that they were not designed to make continuation of the war acceptable to the public, they do console in that the work of art is itself an affirmation of life, and so they are, as he suggested they would be, "consolatory" to the next generation. "Strange Meeting" reaffirms the Keatsian conjunction:

...Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
...
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
...
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Ronald A. Sharp, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979) 5, 30, 33.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 34.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 151.

¹²⁹ Wilfred Owen, "To Susan Owen," 25 May 1918, *Collected Letters* 553.

¹³⁰ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 125-26.

It is not the war which has invalidated the possibilities of poetry here, causing the nostalgic tone, but the death, literally, of the speaker himself, who has “poured [his] spirit without stint” in the wrong place, on the battlefield not the page. It is hard to see, with Heaney, that Owen “seemed almost to obliterate the line between art and life” by sheer force of “truthfulness”,¹³¹ when in fact Owen, like Keats, worries constantly over “the function of art in life”.

Corcoran’s comparison of Heaney’s “The Harvest Bow” with Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” finds Heaney’s motto to be “cautious”, offered “not as discovery and advice (‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’) but as frail aspiration”. Heaney affirms an art “which, in the face of human loss and diminishment, still presumes to offer a model of pacific reconciliation”, but the presumption is only “tentative”.¹³² The comparison is, however, slightly specious. Keats’s own conclusion is tentative if one reads “all / Ye know on earth” as, literally, all one is capable of knowing, and while art may have a consolatory function, this is a different claim from the one which Heaney aspires to.¹³³ “The Harvest Bow” is a poem which has been read as if it were a blueprint for understanding Heaney’s poetic:

The end of art is peace
 Could be the motto of this frail device
 That I have pinned up on our deal dresser-
 Like a drawn snare
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm. (FW, 58)

¹³¹ *The Government of the Tongue* xiv.

¹³² Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 150. Thomas Foster also makes this comparison, drawing the same inference as Corcoran. See Foster, *Seamus Heaney* 87.

¹³³ Henry Hart also reads the poem as a Keatsian revision, and suggests that Heaney “is hardly as sanguine about art’s ability to reconcile opposites as his early sponsor”. “Truth and beauty” in Heaney, he writes, “are at violent odds”. *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1992) 129. This is to read “beauty” as transcendent aspiration rather than human truth, to suggest that one is attainable only at the expense of the other, and to categorize Heaney as a poet of conflict in a Yeatsian sense (see also Hart 130). While agreeing that Heaney, in contrast to Keats, puts the terms in opposition to each other, redefining them in order to do so, “The Harvest Bow” does not appear to me to encapsulate this particular conflict, though the Keatsian imagery of the poem has encouraged the connection. Nor does it seem entirely accurate to suggest that the two elements are “at violent odds” in Heaney. On the contrary, Heaney’s privileging of one over the other has led to some arbitrary readings of other poets, notably Larkin, in *The Redress of Poetry*, where, Roger Caldwell points out, Heaney “would seem to demand that the claims of poetry be set apart from those of telling the truth”. See Caldwell, “Heaney, Larkin and the Grim Reaper,” *Honest Ulsterman* 103 (Spring 1997): 109.

The creation of the bow is “a paradigm of artistic activity”; it is “woven without conscious effort, just as poetry should spring naturally and inevitably from deep wells of being”.¹³⁴ Partly the poem may be read in this way because Heaney’s own critical explication of the poetic process encourages the interpretation: “[t]he achievement of a poem...is an experience of release” and “[a] plane is - fleetingly - established where the poet is intensified in his being and freed from his predicaments”.¹³⁵ Effectively, Heaney reaches a point - the creative misreading of Owen and the lauding of Mandelstam form part of the progression towards this point - where the early question “What do I say if they wheel out their dead?” is not so much answered as found to be unnecessary. Through a somewhat convoluted argument, he reaches the conclusion that “the artistic endeavour...is not obliged to have any intention beyond its own proper completion”.¹³⁶ One can, in a way, he implies, be a war poet without writing about or from a position of conflict. Francis Ledwidge, Heaney writes:

keeps the nest warm and the lines open for a different poetry, one that might combine tendermindedness towards the predicaments of others with an ethically unsparing attitude towards the self. Indeed, it is because of this scruple, this incapacity for grand and overbearing certainties, and not because of the uniform he wore, it is for this reason that Ledwidge can be counted as a “war poet” in the company of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.¹³⁷

It is difficult to resist the thought that the different poetry for which the lines were kept open is perhaps Heaney’s own, and that he has, therefore, implicitly defined himself as a war poet of the ethically-committed soldier-poet variety, while simultaneously distinguishing himself from those who have what he regards as a specific social aim in view.

¹³⁴ Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 123-24. Henry Hart describes the poem as both “confession” and “aesthetic treatise”. *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*, 129.

¹³⁵ *The Government of the Tongue* xxii.

¹³⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Grasmere: Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1984) 8.

¹³⁷ Heaney, introduction, *Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems*, ed. Dermot Bolger (Dublin: New Island Books, 1992) 20.

In his prose, Heaney's apology for poetry is rehearsed through a game of eternal return, a constant brooding on the question of what makes an "adequate" (the word appears time and time again in *The Redress of Poetry*) poetry allied with constant reaffirmation of poetry's transcendence of any pre-ordained considerations of adequacy. What appears on the surface as resolution is, ultimately, more akin to a state of chronic poetic schizophrenia. Hence, he writes that "[t]here is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds", then goes on to say that "within our individual selves we can *reconcile* two orders of knowledge" [my italics].¹³⁸ Heaney's quest for reconciliation, for poetry as "a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony",¹³⁹ is akin to, but not the same as, Yeats's desire to "hold in a single thought reality and justice".¹⁴⁰ In Yeats they are held in conflict; in Heaney's criticism, the conflict is not always recognised as conflict. "[I]t is dangerous", Heaney writes in *Preoccupations*, "for a writer to become too self-conscious about his own processes".¹⁴¹ Lucy McDiarmid, discussing "Exposure", points out that "Heaney's position is a position" in this poem, "even though he is 'neither internee nor informer'".¹⁴² Consciousness of his public role as standard-bearer for poetry sometimes, though not always, inclines Heaney-as-critic towards the suppression of acknowledgement of the virtue in holding the position at once tenable, contradictory, and unstable that is felt in much of his poetry. Peter McDonald rightly suggests that the fact the "distinction between the sources of authority and the satisfactions of reputation...is liable to break down" in Heaney's poetry is one reason why "it is important that Heaney carries on the process of intellectual *work* in thinking about poetry".¹⁴³ The work advocated here is in contrast to the too easy resolution Heaney sometimes asserts: "[i]f one aspect of [his] public voice is growing more sure of its significance in promoting 'the central, epoch-making role that is always available in the

¹³⁸ *The Redress of Poetry* 202-03.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* 193.

¹⁴⁰ *A Vision* 25.

¹⁴¹ *Preoccupations*, 52.

¹⁴² "Heaney and the Politics of the Classroom," *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert F. Garratt 117.

¹⁴³ McDonald, "The Poet and 'The Finished Man'" 107.

world to poetry and the poet', another is starting to see in the process of poetry a more complex, involved and paradoxical encounter with choice and inevitability'.¹⁴⁴ An over-excessive desire on Heaney's part to define his position and his responsibilities has perhaps obscured the fact that, in the final analysis, the only effective apology for poetry lies in the poetry itself, that the question "What is my apology for poetry?" is answered as completely as it can be in the asking.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 107-08.

Chapter 8



Michael Longley: Poet in No Man's Land

"For here the lover and killer are mingled"

-Keith Douglas¹

*"I have written...in a kind of space between - I
don't know between quite what -"*

-David Jones²

*"...in No Man's Land
What is there to talk about but difficult poems?"*

-Michael Longley³

I.

"I am still of [the] opinion", Yeats writes, "that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind - sex and the dead".⁴ Echoing this attitude, Longley states "[m]y concerns continue to be Eros and Thanatos, the traditional subject-matter of the lyric", concerns that are focused for him by "the natural world" and by "the catastrophe of the First World War, the influence of that catastrophe on subsequent Irish and European history and politics".⁵ Those two things - the war and the natural world - like love and death, impinge upon each other throughout his work; both inform a psychic landscape that, Yeatsian-style, is always characterised by awareness of its dual possibilities. Paul Durcan, in his review of *The Echo Gate*, perceptively noted the grounding of Longley's aesthetic in the landscape, literal and metaphorical, of the Great War, a grounding which has coloured all his collections from

¹ "Vergissmeinnicht," *The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas*, ed. Desmond Graham (Oxford: OUP, 1987) 111.

² Preface to *In Parenthesis*, 1937 (London: Faber, 1963) xv.

³ "No Man's Land," *Poems 1963-1983* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991) 199.

⁴ "To Olivia Shakespeare," 2 Oct. 1927, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 730.

⁵ Michael Longley, "The Future is Behind Us," interview by Pat Boran, *Books Ireland* 187 (Summer 1995): 147.

the early *No Continuing City* through to the recent *The Ghost Orchid*: ‘Longley’s themes: Of Love and War. The First World War (which was the beginning of the Irish tragedy as indeed it was the beginning of every other convulsion in the western world in the 20th century) has been the primal landscape of Longley’s poetry from the start’.⁶

The dual possibilities, the ambivalence informing that landscape are inherent in, and originate in, the No Man’s Land of the Great War. Consequently, No Man’s Land resonates both literally and symbolically in Longley’s poetry. His engagement with the Great War begins with the familial, expands to encompass a sense of poetic ancestry, and, more recently, has led to a conscious redefinition and rehabilitation of the politics - in the broadest sense of the word - of remembrance, all three strands working in the elegiac mode. And elegy is, he notes, one side of a coin of which the love poem is the other.⁷ The sense of belonging in No Man’s Land that resonates through his poetry is both symptomatic of, and a cause of, this engagement. No Man’s Land, with its universal significance, begins, in some ways, as a private and literal ground for Longley, which gradually expands within his aesthetic to become an all-encompassing, sometimes intangible, imaginative space, potentially and simultaneously redemptive and threatening, a place of infinite possibility and infinite regret. As it does so, it moves away from its specific historical location in 1914-18, but, in another sense, reaches back to those origins through a developing understanding in the poetry of the inherent ambiguities of the original Great War landscape, and the ways in which those ambiguities have persisted through the century.

During the Great War itself, No Man’s Land was perceived both as actual and metaphorical space. The setting for the now legendary “fraternisation” with the enemy on 25 December 1914, and for the carnage of 1 July 1916, it was, in myth and in fact, both the place of greatest danger in the war and the only place where enemies met without enmity. It was the setting for some of the most anomalous events in trench-life:

⁶ Paul Durcan, “Poetry and Truth,” rev. of *The Echo Gate*, by Michael Longley, and *The Strange Museum*, by Tom Paulin, *Irish Press* 20 Mar. 1980: 6.

⁷ Longley, quoted in Tom Adair, “Of Flock and Fold: A Consideration of the Poetry of Michael Longley,” *Linen Hall Review* 4.1 (Spring 1987): 17.

In certain sectors there were extraordinary agreements that provided for the safe removal of the wounded, the repair of trenches and wire, sunbathing on the first days of spring, and the cutting of grass and the harvesting of fruit in No Man's Land....[In one sector] the French had...established a peaceful co-existence with the Germans, to such a point that they shared the shelter of undestroyed houses in No Man's Land...⁸

If No Man's Land works here as an ironic parody of the original concept of "anyone's land" in the pre-enclosure Open Field system of agriculture, it also travestied that concept as the site of some of the most horrific experiences of the Great War: men drowning in shell-holes already filled with decaying flesh; wounded men, beyond help from behind the wire, dying over a number of days, their cries audible, and often unbearable, to those in the trenches; sappers buried alive beneath its surface. At its most appalling, it was almost beyond language, beyond description. Wilfred Owen, trying to explain No Man's Land to his mother, resorts to an apocalyptic mode of language, a heightened rhetoric that struggles, in one image after another, to convey what can only be approximated:

It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one if its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it - to find the way to Babylon the Fallen.

It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer....

No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.⁹

But, he writes elsewhere, "Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear His voice".¹⁰ It is, paradoxically, the place of eternal damnation and of redemption.

Unsurprisingly, No Man's Land became the focus of war myths - notably the belief that an army of deserters lived beneath its surface, scavenging off corpses - and it did so because it remained, to the end, an unknown quantity, an unconquerable space, at

⁸ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 108.

⁹ "To Susan Owen," 19 Jan. 1917, *Collected Letters of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: OUP, 1967) 429.

¹⁰ "To Susan Owen," 216 May 1917, *Collected Letters* 461.

least in human terms.¹¹ Eric Leed notes that for many Great War veterans, it persisted in the post-war years as “their most disturbing and lasting image” of the war.¹² “No-man’s-land fascinates me”, Sassoon wrote in 1916, “with its jumble of wire-tangles and snaky seams in the earth”,¹³ to the extent that he took huge risks exploring it. Another veteran writes:

In fifty years I have never been able to rid myself of this obsession with no man’s land and the unknown world beyond it. On this side of our wire everything is familiar and every man is a friend, over there, beyond the wire, is the unknown, the uncanny.¹⁴

No Man’s Land was, Leed points out, “the very image of the marginal, the liminal, the ‘betwixt-and-between’”; as a term, it “captured the essence of an experience of having been sent beyond the outer boundaries of social life, placed between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the uncanny”.¹⁵ The existence of a No Man’s Land indicates perpetuation of a war of attrition; it is also a landscape where resolution of the problem is deceptively and tantalisingly possible. (The “resolution” is the point where it is written out of existence.)

In the post-war years, “No Man’s Land” has become a dominating metaphor for what David Jones calls “the space between”, for anything and everything which falls between or beyond reductive social, linguistic, political, literary and other categories.¹⁶ But if it is now indicative of a potential realm beyond reductive categorisation, it was also, in the Great War, a “deathscape” which implicitly questioned the value of writing

¹¹ In Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* (London: Vintage: 1994), one of the most impressive recent imaginative accounts of the Great War, Stephen, after the Armistice, “climbed the ladder...into no man’s land” with “exultation” in his soul, and a lark singing overhead (392). To finally enter No Man’s Land is sensed here as a transcendental experience, almost a heavenly ascent, not an act of human conquest. (“Conquest” has already been proved a lie.)

¹² *No Man’s Land* 15.

¹³ Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983) 51.

¹⁴ Charles Edmund Carrington, quoted in Leed, *No Man’s Land* 14-15.

¹⁵ *No Man’s Land* 14-15.

¹⁶ Thus, while it might be the term used to describe the fifty yards between German and Allied trenches, it has also been used to describe the place of the woman writer, and women generally, in the 20th century, or those who fall outside various literary canons. The *OED* defines it, broadly, as “an area not clearly belonging to any one subject”. (In a Versailles-style indictment of the pre-Troubles political system in Northern Ireland, No Man’s Land was the term used to describe the ground on which Stormont is located.)

as it also made the act of writing more difficult. “[I]t is impossible now to work”, Rosenberg complained in 1916, “and difficult even to think of poetry”;¹⁷ but, he also noted, “if poetry at this time is no use it certainly won’t be at any other”.¹⁸ No Man’s Land is, therefore, both the area which must be challenged if the poet is to find his own aesthetic space, and a metaphor which can create that space. It is the image of war which, perhaps more than any other, still dominates memory in the Western world; it is the place where the question “[w]hat is the use or function of poetry?” re-surfaced with a new energy and new resonance to worry the century’s poets.¹⁹

Both Mahon and Heaney, while they have to some extent articulated their aesthetic questions through negotiation with the landscape and poetry of the First World War, perhaps a now inescapable inheritance, also began their careers, Longley suggests, with what he himself lacked, “recourse to solid hinterlands - Heaney the much publicized farm in County Derry, Mahon his working-class background and the shipyards”. In contrast, Longley, who as a child “walked out of an English household on to Irish streets” felt himself to be more obviously “schizophrenic on the levels of nationality, class and culture”.²⁰ Perhaps as a result, No Man’s Land is a landscape which does not simply inform Longley’s own poetic locale, rather it becomes that poetic locale: it is adapted and adopted as a kind of schizophrenic hinterland which, in acknowledging the contradictory nature of its origins, challenges as it enables the poetry. It offers a “solid” ground whose solidity depends, paradoxically, on its fluidity, on its “betwixt-and-between” quality.

Significantly, the evolution of that hinterland is also entwined with the evolution of a distinctive poetic “voice”, and a growing awareness of identity as ultimately

¹⁷ “To Laurence Binyon,” Autumn 1916, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979) 249.

¹⁸ “To Edward Marsh,” 30 June 1916, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, 237.

¹⁹ Even Graves, who notes in his role as purist Muse poet that function and use remain as they have always been, does also suggest that “nowadays...the application has changed” in response to the “ruin” brought about by “capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry”. *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961) 14.

²⁰ Michael Longley, “Strife and the Ulster Poet,” *Hibernia* (7 Nov. 1969): 11.

unquantifiable.²¹ Longley himself notes “I was slow to find a voice, much slower than Mahon or Heaney”.²² In retrospect, a poem in his first collection, *No Continuing City*, has become, for critics, particularly noteworthy: the elegy for his father, “In Memoriam”. Conor Kelly writes that it has “a depth and a sympathetic imaginative understanding which raises it far above the other poems in the book”;²³ Peter McDonald describes it as “enormously powerful”.²⁴ It stands, in some ways, as a precursor to an aesthetic developed with greater effectiveness and wider resonance in subsequent collections. In “In Memoriam”, the poet’s father and, by implication, the poet, narrowly escape death in No Man’s Land:

Between the corpses and the soup canteens
You swooned away, watching your future spill.
But, as it was, your proper funeral urn
Had mercifully smashed to smithereens,
To shrapnel shards that sliced your testicle.
That instant I, your most unlikely son,
In No Man’s Land was surely left for dead,
Blotted out from your far horizon.²⁵

The poet exists in two places - in life here and now, and in an imaginative realm of non-existence. He is, therefore, indebted to the past, but exists in spite of the past, since No Man’s Land is as much the land of what might have been as of what is. The poet projects back to meet the vision of the future, the “far horizon”, at the moment when it is under threat: his own far horizon recedes into the past to make present into future

²¹ In 1973 Longley formulates his position as: “Je dirais que je suis d’abord irlandais, ensuite ulstérien et enfin, puisque je bénéficie du ‘welfare state’, je suis anglais. Ces trois identités sont difficilement conciliables et je ne suis pas encore arrivé à les concilier”, quoted in Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 207. By 1986, instead of pondering the difficulty of reconciling these identities, he suggests instead that to be “neither English nor Irish completely” is a “healthy condition”, and that it is “out of such splits, such tensions, that I write perhaps.” “Q & A with Michael Longley,” interview by Dillon Johnston, *Irish Literary Supplement* 5.2 (Fall 1986): 20.

²² Quoted in Adair, “Of Flock and Fold” 16.

²³ “Keeping the Faith,” rev. of *Poems 1963-1983*, by Michael Longley, *Magill* (21 Mar. 1985): 47.

²⁴ “From Ulster With Love,” rev. of *Poems 1963-1983*, by Michael Longley, *Poetry Review* 74.4 (Jan. 1985): 14.

²⁵ *Poems 1963-1983* 48. Longley’s first four books - *No Continuing City* (1969); *An Exploded View* (1973); *Man Lying on a Wall* (1976); *The Echo Gate* (1979) - were collected, along with a section of “New Poems”, in *Poems 1963-83*. Very few revisions were made to the poems, and only a handful have been cut altogether. Unless otherwise indicated, therefore, quotations have been taken from *Poems 1963-1983*, subsequent references to which are given in the body of the text as (P, page number).

possibility. No Man's Land, both literally and metaphorically, is seen as his ground of inception as man and poet.²⁶ The speaker of the poem, as well as his father, is a survivor of the Great War, if only by virtue of the poem he has written. And, by implication, since he was held secure by history, history will be secure with him: "As your voice now is locked inside my head, / I yet was held secure, waiting my turn". The poem simultaneously finds a voice for the present as it enacts the finding of a voice in the past: from the words written "in memory" (and from memory) of the father's "anecdote rehearsed and summarised", the narrative is appropriated imaginatively as an authentic telling - "Now I see in close-up...". The "last confidence" spoken by the father - "You hunted down experimental lovers, / Persuading chorus girls and countesses" - enables the poet's own last confident resurrection of "those lost wives", in a voice that can "summon" and "materialise", as consolation at the end of the poem: "They lift their skirts like blinds across your eyes."

In a way, the poem is inadvertently prophetic: "old wounds woke / As cancer" resonates now in the wider context of Northern Ireland, and the re-surfacing of the Troubles in 1968. If the father's experience of the Great War is technically separated from the son's experience of Northern Ireland, the poem offers both the first connection between the two and the last distinction. In subsequent collections, his father is elegised again and again, sometimes directly, as in "Wounds" or "Last Requests", sometimes more obliquely, as in "The Linen Workers". He is elegised because he is the subject of private grief, but also because he is representative of a generation who survived the trenches, and, more broadly, of twentieth-century war victims. An almost symbolic figure, he provides not merely a "taproot into the war" of the past, but also a taproot into the present. In a two-way process, the Great War offers a way into writing about Northern Ireland, as Northern Ireland prompts an eternal imaginative return to the

²⁶ Longley suggests elsewhere that "[s]omehow my father's existence, and his experience, the stories he passed on to me, gave me a kind of taproot into the war". "Making Some Kind of Sense," interview by Fintan O'Toole, *Sunday Tribune*, 17 Mar. 1985: 17. It is a feeling echoed by Doris Lessing, daughter of a Great War veteran, who writes, "I used to joke that it was the war that had given birth to me...But it was no joke" *Under My Skin: Volume One of my Autobiography, to 1949* (London: Flamingo, 1995) 10. Other poets - D.J.Enright, Ted Hughes - are also drawn to the Great War through the experience of the father.

earlier conflict. Alan Peacock discusses the “analogical processes” in Longley’s poetry which “provide a generalised context for treating particularized, local experience”, concluding that a pattern of “wide-ranging cultural parallelisms” is discernible throughout his career.²⁷ That pattern also incorporates a development: if the strength of the early “In Memoriam” lies in the way in which it expresses private grief through public utterance, a progression that is self-referential and heavily coded enables public utterance in the later poems to be mediated through what is felt as private grief.

Longley describes “In Memoriam” as “some kind of descent from the ivory tower”; it confirmed for him the view that “[y]ou have got to bring your personal sorrow to the public utterance” to avoid the “deadly danger of regarding the agony of others as raw material for your art, and your art as a solace for them in their suffering”.²⁸ “Wounds”, from his second collection, *An Exploded View*, is itself an exploded view of the earlier “In Memoriam”. In “Wounds”, the Great War becomes, as Fussell notes, both an “archetype for subsequent violence - as well as a criticism of it”.²⁹ The poem is notable, in the first instance, for being one of the few, and earliest, imaginative evocations of the Unionist experience of the Great War, an evocation which, in linking that experience with personal suffering, and with sectarian killing in contemporary Northern Ireland, breaks tribal taboos “kept...like secrets”, sets memory in opposition to society. The poem was misread by one reviewer as a “fine tribal Orange poem”, a straightforward celebration of the Ulster Division’s achievement.³⁰ Instead, it is an elegy for (sometimes misguided) innocence in whatever shape or form that might take: its sympathies encompass the Ulster Division and the “boy about to die, / Screaming ‘Give ‘em one for the Shankill!’”, the teenage soldiers in Northern Ireland, “bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer”, the murdered bus-conductor and his family, and the “shivering boy” who pulls the trigger in front of “the children”, the “bewildered

²⁷ “Michael Longley: Poet Between Worlds,” *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 274, 279.

²⁸ Interview with Michael Longley, by Dermot Healy, *Southern Review* 31.3 (Summer 1995):560.

²⁹ *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) 324.

³⁰ Thomas McCarthy, “Northern Voices,” rev. of *The Echo Gate*, by Michael Longley, *Irish Times*, 9 Feb. 1980: 13.

wife" (*P*, 86). Against the youth of those suffering and causing suffering in the poem is set the death of the father, a delayed result of violence that revises, or at least offers a retrospective perspective on, the passionately held beliefs that inspire violent action. "[I]t seems to me", Longley writes, "important...to imagine how one can be so brain washed or so angry or in a sense perhaps even so innocent that one can drive in a car and go into somebody's house and shoot that person stone dead".³¹ The "shivering boy", the "teenage soldiers", the innocent civilian victim - all these things are, unexpectedly, redolent of the now-notorious "innocence" that characterised the 1914 generation, that led to the inspired, futile attacks on the Somme in 1916. "Bewilderment" in both stanzas unites the actions if only in their incomprehensibility. Thus, the attempt to make sense of events, to balance consequence against motivation - his father's words "I am dying for King and Country, slowly" - carries an enormous amount of weight in the poem. "Slowly" adds to a well-known, now sometimes trite sentiment, turns cliché to tragedy through a self-aware irony redolent of the disillusion that damaged the concept itself, while the death simultaneously serves to dignify the concept. The "landscape of dead buttocks", over which his father followed for "fifty years", is a permanent condition: past and present, like the war and the consequent death(s), are not so much paralleled as telescoped into a seamless continuity. "Wounds", as a title, thus encompasses more than the obvious wounds in the poem - the cancer, the bullet-holes. It looks back to the "old wounds" of "In Memoriam"; it expands to include emotional as well as literal wounding, the open wounds of history aggravated in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, the wounding of the innocent, the invisible scars left on society. (Shell-shocked soldiers in the Great War were described as "wounded without wounds".³²) One of the functions of Longley's elegies is to reveal not only the short-term, tangible damage caused by violence, but also the long-term effects not immediately, or possibly ever, readily apparent.

³¹ "Q & A with Michael Longley," interview by Dillon Johnston 20.

³² Leed, *No Man's Land* 177.

The modern elegy, Ramazani writes, “resembles not so much a suture as ‘an open wound’”.³³ It exists, in one sense, in the space between its author and its subject matter, to the extent that the subject matter itself may become the impossibility of crossing that space. Ramazani suggests that:

Owen states only half of his paradoxical aesthetic when he writes: “My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity”. “Pity” is Owen’s term for emotional identification with the victims of war. But Owen’s poetry suggests that “pity” cannot erase the boundary that separates victim from onlooker....His subject is also the incomprehensibility of war; the poetry is also in the alienation. Having roused pity, Owen often forces the reader back, warning that pity cannot bridge the chasm separating spectator and victim.³⁴

In effect, he concludes, “the poet inhabits a terrible no-man’s-land between victim and reader”.³⁵ Longley’s poetry, like that of the Great War poets, exists “in the pity”.³⁶ But, as with Owen, it exists also in the alienation, in its helpless awareness of the impossibility of reaching its own subject-matter. In “Last Requests”, that alienation is imaged as a tangible barrier:

I thought you blew a kiss before you died,
But the bony fingers that waved to and fro
Were asking for a Woodbine, the last request
Of many soldiers in your company,
The brand you chose to smoke for forty years
Thoughtfully, each one like a sacrament.
I who brought peppermints and grapes only
Couldn’t reach you through the oxygen tent. (P, 150)

It is also intangible, in the failure in understanding, and in the inability of love to counteract death: the “Heart contradicting...epitaph” in Part I does not do so metaphorically in Part II. The last request is also a last rite, one rehearsed again and again through a life that, after the experience of the Great War, is no longer taken for granted. Longley attributes to his father a sense of “unexpected bonus” which

³³ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 4.

³⁴ *Poetry of Mourning* 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 82.

³⁶ Alan Peacock makes this point, “Michael Longley: Poet Between Worlds,” 269, as does George Mackay Brown, “Poetry Without Obstacles,” rev. of *Man Lying on a Wall*, by Michael Longley, *Scotsman* 4 Sept. 1976: 12.

“pervaded all the ordinary aspects of life”;³⁷ it is a sense which he has imaginatively inherited, hence his belief that “the artist...has a duty to celebrate life in all its aspects”.³⁸ But the reverse side to a celebration of life - the awareness of death - is, however, implicit in the “sacramental” nature of celebration: each moment held as if it were both the first and the last. That sensibility forms what Fussell describes as “the Great War theme - already mastered by Hardy even before the war broke out - of the ironic proximity of violence and disaster to safety, to meaning, and to love”.³⁹ The persistence of that theme in Longley’s work means that the effective elegies are those which are anti-elegiac, that do not impose meaning or consolation on the inconsolable and incomprehensible, but instead point up the inadequacy of traditional elegiac resources. They do so as a way of finding a voice for, rather than an answer to, grief. Their hallmark, as with many of Owen’s poems, is sometimes one of guilt. It is there at the end of “Last Requests” for the failure to “reach” his father; it is implicit in “Kindertotenlieder”, which, rejecting Friedrich Rückert’s original, consolatory elegising, opts instead for a Dylan Thomas “Refusal to Mourn”, mourns the fact that it can no longer mourn, but still creates, though rhythmic repetition, the song it will not create: “There can be no songs for dead children...No songs for the children...” (P, 87). And as with Mahon, as, perhaps, with every modern elegist, “every elegy is an elegy for elegy”.⁴⁰

II.

Fussell’s Great War theme is a theme peculiarly pertinent to Northern Ireland, where the redemptive ground is also, in Keith Douglas’s phrase, “the nightmare ground”, where “proximity” collapses into synonymy.⁴¹ The private, domestic space, which in the

³⁷ Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994) 19.

³⁸ Introduction, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, ed. Michael Longley (Belfast: Arts Council, 1971)

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³⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 69.

⁴⁰ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* 8.

⁴¹ “Vergissmeinnicht”. Longley uses Douglas’s lines from this poem - “returning over the nightmare ground / we found the place again...” - as epigraph to the “Letters” sequence in *An Exploded View* (P, 76), where his own ground has become a nightmare ground: “Blood on the kerbstones...The pity, the terror” (cf. Yeats’s “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”: “days are dragon-ridden, the

Great War was idealised by the soldier at the Front, is no longer inviolate: the domestic details in "Wounds", the invasion of violence "Before they could turn the television down / Or tidy away the supper dishes" (*P*, 86), hint at what is explored more comprehensively in the later "The Civil Servant", from the sequence "Wreaths":

He was preparing an Ulster fry for breakfast
When someone walked into the kitchen and shot him:
A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull,
The books he had read, the music he could play. (*P*, 148)

"I will not", Rosenberg insisted in the trenches, "leave a corner of my consciousness covered up".⁴² In the face of random domestic killing, Longley implies, it is, in any case, impossible to do so. As Edmund Blunden eventually discovered in the Great War, there is no such thing as "out of the line".⁴³ More completely than Heaney, Longley has absorbed the "hereditary" knowledge from the First World War that colours all subsequent perceptions: "hell", as Keith Douglas writes, "cannot be let loose twice".⁴⁴ That Longley writes with the sense of "pervasive, latent war" may be one reason why the title "war poet" is attributed to him perhaps even more frequently than to Heaney, even if Heaney, as the more popular figure, has been exposed to greater "war poet" pressures from the public.⁴⁵ It may also be something to do with the fact that a poet in Ireland is known partly by the ancestry he keeps. The family ghosts who habitually walk Longley's poetry are rarely separated from the war which he perceives as a turning point for Western civilisation, and in which they were intimately, and destructively involved: from his father, to "Uncle Lionel" who "good for nothing except sleep-walking to the Great War...[c]ollected littered limbs" in a sack until "His head got

nightmare / Rides upon sleep...Violence upon the roads..." etc.) The birth of the son is shadowed by the fear of death: "the waters break" in both a beginning and a final cataclysm.

⁴² "To Laurence Binyon," Autumn 1916, *Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg* 248.

⁴³ *Undertones of War* 1928 (London: Penguin, 1982) 206.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 100.

⁴⁵ Rory Brennan writes: "Longley is in fact a war poet who has never borne arms. Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis, Wilfred Owen would have him as an honorary comrade." "Contemporary Irish Poetry: An Overview," *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally, 13. Andrew Motion describes him as "a war poet", and also notes that such a view is now so commonplace that, "he is probably fed up with being called one". "Burning Snow," rev. of *The Echo Gate*, by Michael Longley, *New Statesman*, 11 Jan. 1980: 61.

blown off in No Man's Land" (*P*, 133), (and whose "vanishing act", Longley writes, "haunted my childhood"⁴⁶), to his mother, elegised in "Third Light" as making the transition from life to death, to re-marry her husband, on a Great War battlefield: "Waiting to scramble hand in hand with him / Out of the shell hole..." (*P*, 200) and his grandmother with "second sight" and "Flanders...at the kitchen window - / The mangle rusting in No Man's Land, gas / Turning the antimacassars yellow" (*P*, 151).

But his sense of the Great War as a political and social crisis which Europe is "still getting over" is also allied to his sense of literary antecedents:

Modernism in English writing came about to some extent because two generations were decimated in the first and second world wars and certain American theorists, i.e., Eliot and Pound, moved in and filled a vacuum. And then a brilliant generation of poets in the thirties - mainly MacNeice and Auden - showed by their practice that the lyric tradition was not exhausted. They went back via Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen, both of whom were killed in the trenches, to Hardy and Keats and Donne. I see myself as doing that in a humble way as well.⁴⁷

To a greater extent than perhaps any other contemporary Northern Irish poet, Longley's aesthetic measures itself against the war poets associated with the First and Second World Wars: Owen, Douglas, Thomas, Rosenberg. Longley describes his "proper reluctance to cash in on the troubles",⁴⁸ a feeling shared by his contemporaries. (To "engage" with the situation in Northern Ireland, Muldoon notes, can lead to the accusation of being "on the make, almost, cashing in".⁴⁹ "[W]e cannot be unaware", Heaney writes, "of the link between the political glamour of the place (Ulster), the sex-appeal of violence, and the prominence accorded to the poets".⁵⁰) It is, as previously discussed, the problem first confronted by the Great War soldier-poets, whose popularity (even if, perhaps especially if, posthumous) is not unconnected to the now almost romantic mystique surrounding the Great War, and who sensed at the time the

⁴⁶ Interview with Michael Longley, by Dermot Healy, *Southern Review* 558.

⁴⁷ "The Longley Tapes," interview with Michael Longley, by Robert Johnstone, *Honest Ulsterman* 78 (Summer 1985): 23

⁴⁸ "Making Some Kind of Sense," an interview with Michael Longley, by Fintan O'Toole, *Sunday Tribune*, 17 Mar. 1985: 17.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 13.

⁵⁰ "Calling the Tune," an interview with Seamus Heaney, by Tom Adair, *Linen Hall Review* 6.2 (Autumn 1989): 5.

paradoxical nature of their engagement in and with the War, even if, as in the case of Sassoon, the primary function attributed to the poetry was social rather than literary. Allied to this sense of a moral dilemma was a stylistic one: how to write an experience for which nothing in their cultural background appeared to provide a precedent.

On the whole, the soldier poets resolved both dilemmas on their own terms, and in similar ways; not by abandoning a tradition, or through conscious decisions to compromise "Poetry", but by working with a literary inheritance (sometimes parodically), and by opting to live with, rather than "resolve" the paradox. In that sense, their influence, as has been noted, pervades much contemporary poetry. But those terms are ones which Longley has absorbed, consciously or unconsciously, to the extent that, more than most contemporary poets, his reflections on poetry are virtually interchangeable with those of other earlier twentieth-century war poets. His first reaction to the Troubles, the "burgeoning nightmare", was, he suggests, a feeling of inadequacy, that he and his contemporaries "didn't have the equipment as lyric poets to deal with it",⁵¹ a reaction perhaps partially conditioned by the critical judgements of inadequacy sometimes passed on the trench lyrics, and, in fairness, the failure of some war poetry, in both the First and Second World Wars, and in Northern Ireland, to hold its own against propagandist expectations. There was "also the fact", he notes, "that we ourselves represented, or our families came from, one side or the other",⁵² hence the ever-present danger of succumbing under political pressure to what Fussell describes as the "simple antithesis" that dominated thinking in the failed poems of the Great War.

But as Longley's introduction to *Causeway* in 1971 makes clear, Owen *et al* stand as an example of resistance to such pressures. In 1916, Rosenberg wrote: "You know the conditions I have always worked under...You know how earnestly one must wait on ideas, (you cannot coax real ones to you) and let as it were, a skin grow naturally round and through them."⁵³ He reiterates the idea some months later: "I

⁵¹ "Making Some Kind of Sense" 17.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Isaac Rosenberg, "To Edward Marsh," 4 Aug. 1916, *Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, 239. Cf. Longley's comments in the long gap between his collections *The Echo Gate* and *Gorse Fires*:

will...saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.”⁵⁴ Echoing this view, Longley writes:

Too many critics seem to expect a harvest of paintings, poems, plays and novels to drop from the twisted branches of civil discord. They fail to realise that the artist needs time in which to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it and possibly even suggest solutions to current and very urgent problems by reframing them according to the dictates of his particular discipline. He is not some sort of super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened. Rather, as Wilfred Owen stated over fifty years ago, it is the artist's duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation.⁵⁵

Inevitably, to share Owen's view is also to share the frustration: “Warnings generally go unheeded. Art seldom changes things.”⁵⁶ But, fundamentally, it is also to work on the assumption that though an assertion of art's transformative function cannot be made, that does not preclude the possibility of its having a transformative effect.⁵⁷ “[O]ne is shamed by the example of...Wilfred Owen”, Longley suggests, since “in the front line, [he] just sat down and wrote poems”.⁵⁸ It is not, of course, as simple as it sounds, in that Owen fought and killed even as he offered the “pity of war” as his subject. But it does recognise that the answer to the dilemma - as it was also Owen's answer - is to write the dilemma. It is perhaps for this reason that Brendan Kennelly describes Longley as “probably the most confident poet writing in Ireland today...the one who most

“...I believe that my present silence is part of the impulse and sooner silence than forgery. I've enough technique now to be quite a good forger.” “The Longley Tapes” 27.

⁵⁴ “To Laurence Binyon,” Autumn 1916, *Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, 248.

⁵⁵ Introduction, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 9.

⁵⁷ MacNeice's response to Auden's “The Public v. the Late Mr W.B. Yeats” also works on these terms: the “fallacy” of Auden's argument, MacNeice suggests, “lies in thinking that it is the function of art to make things happen and that the effect of art upon actions is something either direct or calculable.” *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 1941, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1967) 192. In 1970, Longley suggests: “I'm not saying that something I might write might save lives, but there's always a chance that it will,” quoted in Eavan Boland, “The Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience: 3: Creativity,” *Irish Times* 14 Aug. 1970: 12. By 1997, though the idea is not couched as transparently, or as self-referentially as this, the formulation is essentially unchanged: “I don't...agree with Auden when he said ‘Poetry makes nothing happen’ and it didn't save one Jew from the gas ovens. How do we know?...I actually think it stops things from getting worse.” “‘Walking forwards into the past’: an interview with Michael Longley”, *Irish Studies Review* 18 (Spring 1997): 39.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Boland, “The Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience: 3: Creativity” 12.

successfully resists the temptation to explain himself or his work".⁵⁹ The "apologia", either for one's political activities, or inactivities, is not made to facilitate poetry; rather it constitutes the poetry:

I accept, as I must, the criticism of the slogan "Malone Road fiddles while the Falls Road burns", the implication that the still and heartless centre of the hurricane is the civic inactivity of liberals like myself. Nevertheless, I have to insist that poetry is an act which in the broadest sense can be judged political, a normal human activity...⁶⁰

(As Longley's embattled feeling makes clear here, the "crisis of conscience" is not necessarily limited to those directly involved in war: it may, in fact, be the opposite. Northern Irish poetry has helped to extend perceptions of "war poetry" away from the narrow view, still prevalent in England, that it is experiential and occasional - a combatant art-form.)

If the Great War offered a challenge to the poet in terms of perceptions of his role as artist, as "man of action", as voice of conscience, or as social commentator, it also offered a stylistic challenge, one which was met by redirecting and rejuvenating the resources of a tradition. Rosenberg's feeling, quoted above, that poetry must still be of some use in the trenches, also reverberates in the issue of poetic form. "Simple *poetry*", Rosenberg writes, "that is where an interesting complexity of thought is kept in tone and right value to the dominating idea so that it is understandable and still ungraspable".⁶¹ The preoccupation with the possibilities of lyric form in the trenches is not indicative of stagnation in an inadequate mode of writing; rather it suggests a desire, Yeatsian-fashion, to push out the boundaries of the lyric tradition.⁶² In doing so, the act of writing becomes self-justifying. Heaney notes that Longley's poetry has, or should, "enforce a realisation that the sweetness of achieved forms is a good in itself".⁶³ In

⁵⁹ Brendan Kennelly, "Wonder and Awe," rev. of *Gorse Fires*, by Michael Longley, *Fortnight* 295 (May 1991): 24.

⁶⁰ Michael Longley, "Strife and the Ulster Poet" 11.

⁶¹ "To George Bottomley," 23 July 1916, *Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, 238.

⁶² In a letter to Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves wrote: "I don't want to lose sight of you - You must help S.S. and R.N. and R.G. to revolutionize English Poetry - So outlive this War." c.22 Dec. 1917, Appendix C, *Collected Letters of Wilfred Owen*, 596.

⁶³ Blurb to *Poems 1963-1983*, by Michael Longley. King Penguin Series (London: Penguin, 1985).

effect, it is also a realisation forced upon Longley (and his contemporaries Heaney and Mahon) by the example of poets writing in earlier wars. Keith Douglas writes: "my object (and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line."⁶⁴ His assertion that "every word must work for its keep",⁶⁵ itself a response to the aesthetic preoccupations of the Great War poets, is also echoed by Longley: "every word has to earn its place".⁶⁶ Poets in both world wars (and in the Northern Ireland Troubles) resist the notion that the scale of a poem reflects the magnitude of events, or, conversely, that the magnitude of the subject can of itself make the poem.⁶⁷

For Longley, the war poets serve to prove the point that the lyric tradition is alive and kicking, and potentially inexhaustible. Crucially, his own sense of a literary tradition is validated not so much because it is formed in No Man's Land, but because it survives *and* precedes it. The "nightmare ground" of the twentieth century precipitates doubt and self-questioning, but the sense of tradition serves to validate for Longley an underlying assumption that "the equipment as lyric poets" to deal with conflict is lyric poetry. In a retrospect on the reasons behind the stylistic inheritance of the Ulster "tight-assed trio",⁶⁸ he suggests that:

the poets here needed some kind of shape with which to deal with the emerging nightmare of the Troubles. Some kind of tact was required; some kind of order was required, which meant that all of the resources of the

⁶⁴ "To J.C. Hall," 10 Aug. 1943, *The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas* 124.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 111.

⁶⁶ "The Longley Tapes" 27.

⁶⁷ Thus, Longley writes, "I hate the confusion of miniature with minor, and I hope I have said extensive things within a small compass", "Q & A with Michael Longley," *Irish Literary Supplement* 21. "A poem's weight and seriousness", he also states, "should not...be measured by its subject matter alone. A bad poem about the hydrogen bomb tells us infinitely less than a good poem about a blackbird." "A Tongue at Play," *How Poet's Work*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996) 120. (Cf. Edward Thomas: "Anything, however small, may make a poem; nothing, however great, is certain to." Quoted in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 12.)

⁶⁸ The description applied, with a negative charge, to Heaney, Longley and Mahon, "the implication being", D.E.S. Maxwell notes, "that they are bound up by words, forms and formalities; that life, vigour, and earthiness are buried under aesthetics". Maxwell, "Semantic Scruples: A Rhetoric for Politics in the North," *Literature and the Changing Ireland*, ed. Peter Connolly (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982) 171.

native tradition were required. And that meant looking to what had happened at an earlier time of disturbance and menace...⁶⁹

To be a “war poet” may simply be, in the broadest definition, to assert the inherent value and potential possibilities of poetry at a time when they appear to be proscribed, whilst simultaneously destabilising the text by opening it up to the very context in which it is threatened.

III.

Since that context - a psychic landscape that is also a landscape of war - is seen by Longley (as, also, by Ted Hughes) as the essential condition of the twentieth century - “Looked at from the next century, we will be thinking in terms of the fifty or sixty years war that began in 1914”;⁷⁰ “Europe is still getting over 1914-18”⁷¹ - the war poet “ancestors” are also appropriated, imaginatively, as ghostly contemporaries: in “Second Sight”, the poet himself is, in a traditional as well as familial sense, a “ghost among ghosts...Who crowd around me to give directions” in the troglodyte trench-world of the London Underground (*P*, 151). Notably in the two late 1970s collections, *Man Lying on a Wall* and *The Echo Gate*, the war poets become subjects as well as precursors: Edward Thomas, Keith Douglas and Isaac Rosenberg are obliquely elegised in a way which casts the subject of elegy as the ghostly self-elegiser. “Edward Thomas’s War Diary” (*P*, 134) undertakes the task that Thomas himself, killed in 1917, was largely unable to fulfil, or even begin - to write the experience of the Front into his poetry. It does so almost entirely through quotation re-arranged so that it comes at what Douglas Dunn calls “an imagined angle to reality”.⁷² Thomas’s diary, unlike Sassoon’s consciously literary and self-reflexive narrative (which perhaps had at least one eye to publication), is a series of sense impressions, the time progression marked only by

⁶⁹ “‘Walking forwards into the past’: an interview with Michael Longley” 37.

⁷⁰ “Q & A with Michael Longley,” *Irish Literary Supplement* 20.

⁷¹ “‘Walking forwards into the past’: an interview with Michael Longley” 35.

⁷² Douglas Dunn, “The Poetry of the Troubles,” rev. of *Selected Poems*, by Michael Longley, *Times Literary Supplement* (31 July 1981): 886.

observance of seasons and animals, the landscape gradually changing from white to green. In the poem, images are lifted and restructured to create a narrative dream-world which is, in a way, the other dream Thomas himself, on waking, could not remember.⁷³ It recreates the scene with a fidelity to original details that is also testimony to Thomas's own attention to the minutiae of the landscape around him. The diary is, like much Great War writing, a conjunction of war and the natural world: one which makes for some anomalous observations: "Owls on Dainville Road. Machine guns and hanging lights above No-Man's-Land"; "Tested battery compass. Talk with Fenner about martens in Ireland, badgers, plovers, barrows etc."; "Chaffinch sang once....Sordid ruin of Estaminet", and so on.⁷⁴ Thomas's "eye on what remained" in Longley's poem is an eye on the ruins of the landscape and towns caused by the war, the remains of the pre-war civilisation; it is also an awareness of what can still be seen of the natural world within that ruination. "Mole", the companion piece to "Edward Thomas's War Diary", also fills in the blanks, responding to Thomas's original question - "Does a mole ever get hit by a shell?"⁷⁵ - with its own further question, a question that encompasses the whole poem and in doing so turns Thomas's original question into its own answer:

Who bothers to record
This body digested
By its own saliva
Inside the earth's mouth
And long intestine,

Or thanks it for digging
Its own grave, darkness
Growing like an eyelid
Over the eyes, hands
Swimming in the soil?
(P, 135)

⁷³ See Edward Thomas, *The Diary of Edward Thomas 1 January - 8 April 1917*, ed. Roland Gant and Myfanwy Thomas (Gloucestershire: The Whittington Press, 1977) 13-14, 16, 22, 24-25, 28. The diary, which was not discovered until the late 1960s, first appeared in the *Anglo-Welsh Review* in Autumn 1971.

⁷⁴ *The Diary of Edward Thomas* 3, 16.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 17. Quoted as epigraph to Longley's poem.

The poem's anthropomorphism serves to elegise the dead of the war (including Thomas himself) - the soldiers lost in a communal grave; the men who were drowned in the mud of No Man's Land; more generally, those forgotten by history: the "vanishing act[s]". The lines also reverberate in a Northern Irish context, with its own unrecorded or unremembered vanishing acts.⁷⁶

Tjebbe Westendorp reductively categorises Longley's "Bog Cotton", "Mole", "The War Poets", and "Edward Thomas's War Diary" as poems about war poets, and appears to find it odd that "Longley is full of compassion with [*sic*] the soldier poets of the Great War, while at the same time he does not make a single allusion to the men and the boys involved in the contemporary violence of Northern Ireland".⁷⁷ The allusion is perhaps more subtle and, consequently, more elusive than Westendorp recognises. In "The War Poets", the poet looks back through MacNeice to the Great War poets in order to cast light upon his own situation in Northern Ireland. The "Irish implications" are, as Terence Brown points out, "suggested by a buried allusion to Louis MacNeice's poem of a First World War childhood, 'Carrickfergus', where the Irish boy at school...thinks the 'war would go on for ever'". Thus, "the sense of the endlessness of the First World War is made a metaphor for the interminable nature of the Irish troubles".⁷⁸ The soldier-poets' deaths are a rebirth into darkness, into obliteration within the element from which they came: "shrapnel opened up again the fontanel / Like a hailstone melting towards deep water..." (P, 168). The endlessness is also, therefore, sensed as permanent because after death "the armistice never comes":⁷⁹ as with

⁷⁶ "Concepts such as 'a clean slate' and 'drawing a line' are", Longley writes, "offensive. If we are not ever to know who bombed Enniskillen, Birmingham, Dublin and Monaghan, we can at least go on asking 'Where are all the missing bodies of the last twenty-five years? Where have they been buried?' In the ghastly paramilitary argot these are the 'bog jobs'." "Memory and Acknowledgement," *Irish Review* 17/18 (Winter 1995): 158.

⁷⁷ "The Great War in Irish Memory: The Case of Poetry," *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama*, ed. Geert Lernout (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991) 135, 137.

⁷⁸ Terence Brown, "Who Dares to Speak? Ireland and the Great War," *English Studies in Transition*, ed. Robert Clark and Piero Boitani (London: Routledge, 1993) 234. See also Chapter 4, 120-22 above.

⁷⁹ In this sense, Edna Longley suggests, the poem "obliquely links Northern Irish poets with the dead soldier-poets". See *The Living Stream* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994): 81-82.

MacNeice's "Carrickfergus", the poem reaches into a never-ending, essentially static, future:

...darkness streamed into the dormitory
Where everybody talked about the war ending
And always it would be the last week of the war.
(P, 168)

In the poem which, in *The Echo Gate*, immediately precedes "The War Poets", "Bog Cotton", different historical and geographical perspectives also work to illuminate the poet's home ground. "Bog Cotton" is an Irish pastoral which is connected in the poem to a tradition of pastoral images associated with war, through a re-writing of Keith Douglas's "Desert Flowers", itself a response to Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches". Paul Fussell notes that red flowers in the Great War "became fixtures of experience because they had already attained an indispensable place in pastoral elegy, where red and purple flowers...are traditional".⁸⁰ Hence, Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" draws on, and redirects, traditional pastoral elegy, with its "Poppies whose roots are in man's veins", as it is also a response to one of the most popular poems of the war, John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" ("If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields."⁸¹). Douglas, in "Desert Flowers", acknowledges, ironically, the "tautological" nature of the war-poet's enterprise:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers-
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying-
the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas, slaying

the mind: but the body can fill
the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
at nights, the most hostile things of all.
But that is not new.⁸²

⁸⁰ *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*, 1988. Rpt. as *Killing in Verse and Prose* (London: Bellew, 1990) 188. For an extended discussion of Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" and its relation to English pastoral, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 250-53.

⁸¹ *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. Jon Silkin, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1981) 85.

⁸² *The Complete Poems* 102.

All the Great War elements are here: the flowers, the rats, the quenching of human spirit as well as life,⁸³ the enemy (the opposing army) that is not really felt as the true enemy (lice, rats, etc.). The first stanza of Longley's "Bog Cotton" stylistically imitates "Desert Flowers", but with a difference:

Let me make room for bog cotton, a desert flower-
Keith Douglas, I nearly repeat what you were saying
When you apostrophised the poppies of Flanders
And the death of poetry there...

(P, 167)

The poem evokes images of the First and Second world wars, but the "flower" on his Irish landscape is not one which feeds on the corpses of victims of violence; it acknowledges the war landscapes evoked by his poetic predecessors, but attempts to make instead a "hospital" of his own. To "make room" is a tentative endeavour, against the odds, that takes place entirely in parentheses. The parentheses extend through the second and third stanzas to become the substance of the poem, pushing outwards to create, literally and metaphorically, the "space between": "(It hangs on by a thread, denser than thistledown, / Reluctant to fly...And useless too, though it might well bring to mind / The plumping of pillows, the staunching of wounds...)". It is a healing pastoral which, with awareness of the ambiguous nature and function of pastoral in the wars, makes no such grandiose claims for itself. As with Douglas's own "Desert Flowers", fine detail is rewarded with a far horizon: the two, in fact, become inseparable. Douglas, in his final stanza, writes:

I see men as trees suffering
or confound the detail and the horizon.
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
of what the others never set eyes on.

Longley's tribute to Douglas's vision works with the same technique: it sees beyond the Second to the First World War, and does so from the perspective of his own ground:

You saw that beyond the thirstier desert flowers

⁸³ "Sometimes I give way and am appalled at the devastation this life seems to have made in my nature", Rosenberg wrote. "It seems to have blunted me...all I do is without energy and interest". "To Miss Seaton," 14 Feb. 1918, *Collected Works* 268.

There fell hundreds of thousands of poppy petals
 Magnified to blood stains by the middle distance
 Or through the still unfocused sights of a rifle-
 And Isaac Rosenberg wore one behind his ear.

(P, 167)

The “hundreds of thousands of poppy petals” evoke the poppy petal shower of Remembrance Day ceremonies, realised fully in the poem, in the context of another war, as deaths - “Magnified to blood stains”: the last line, while it looks back to Rosenberg’s poem, also looks to his death.⁸⁴

Longley family and literary ghosts, hitherto never explicitly connected in the poems, converge on “No Man’s Land”. The first half of the poem appeared in *Man Lying on a Wall* entitled “Granny”. An elegy for his “jewish granny”, the poem redresses the neglect of her memory, gives her substance within the family history - “I shall give skin and bones / To my jewish granny...” - and obliquely indicts the anti-Semitism of the twentieth century: “A terrible century, / A circle of Christian names”.⁸⁵ It was subsequently rewritten to become Part I of “No Man’s Land”, included in the “New Poems” of *Poems 1963-1983*. The poem is both a culmination of the preoccupations that colour the first four collections; it also points towards the themes which dominate the later two:

I

Who will give skin and bones to my Jewish granny?
 She has come down to me in the copperplate writing
 Of three certificates, a dog-eared daguerreotype
 And the one story my grandfather told about her.

He tossed a brick through a rowdy neighbour’s window
 As she lay dying, and Jessica, her twenty years
 And mislaid whereabouts gave way to a second wife,
 A terrible century, a circle of Christian names.

II

I tilt her head towards you, Isaac Rosenberg,
 But can you pick out that echo of splintering glass
 From under the bombardment, and in No Man’s Land

⁸⁴ Rosenberg’s red poppy, “white with the dust”, implicitly connects images of the Great War with the Irish landscape’s white bog cotton. Those colours - white and red - dominate, as will be seen, Longley’s later collection, *The Ghost Orchid*, and, to a lesser extent, *Gorse Fires*.

⁸⁵ *Man Lying on a Wall* (London: Gollancz, 1976) 36.

What is there to talk about but difficult poems?

Because your body was not recovered either
I try to read the constellations of brass buttons,
Identity discs that catch the light a little.
A shell-shocked carrier pigeon flaps behind the lines
(P, 199)

The “vanishing act[s]” in his family history are connected here to both world wars and the issue of remembering the century’s dead. On one level, Longley’s poem is a holocaust poem: less confident than the earlier version - opening assertion modified to question - the attempt in “No Man’s Land” to give tragic status and human dignity to his “Jewish granny” loses its significance in a “terrible century” simply by reason of numbers. It returns to the Great War as, in a way, the origin of a “terrible century”, the first calamity in which the sheer scale of suffering seemed to disallow space for individual tragedy (“can you pick out that echo...”). While the “mislaid whereabouts” of Jessica may be literal - as it is with Rosenberg, whose “body was not recovered” - it refers also, and in both cases, to a mislaid whereabouts in history: those for whom public remembrance has obscured remembering; those whose deaths themselves are unrecorded; the deaths whose numbers are not even known. Connecting the two deaths also evokes the concept of the lost generations - Jessica’s “twenty years” serving as an ironic counterpoint to the “granny” of conventional expectation and one which offers a parallel with the soldier-poets killed prematurely in the Great War.

If the place in which the poet is writing is in some respects a No Man’s Land, he is implicitly passing judgement on a society which forces poetry into the margins (a society which has also permitted much of its own history to founder there). It is also an implicit judgement on the political violence of his own country where, as Falkenhayn said of the First World War, “[t]he first principle...[is]...to yield not one foot of ground”.⁸⁶ Sassoon wrote of the Great War:

...while exploring my way into the War I had discovered the impermanence of its humanities. One evening we could all be together in a cosy room in Corbie, with Wilmot playing the piano...A single machine-gun or a few

⁸⁶ Quoted in Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 1989 (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1990) 144.

shells might wipe out the whole picture within a week. Last summer the First Battalion had been part of my life; by the middle of September it had been almost obliterated....And now there was a steel curtain down between April and May. On the other side of the curtain, if I was lucky, I should meet the survivors, and we should begin to build up our little humanities all over again.⁸⁷

In "No Man's Land", Longley writes from a poetic landscape that is designed to make the survival of poetry as evidently problematic as it is felt to be within the poetic tradition of war poets that he constructs in his own verse. But the poem simultaneously searches, through Part II, for a way of hearing, articulating, and visualising that which is in danger of obliteration - not only Sassoon's "humanities", but, more specifically, poetry itself. In the rhetorical question "in No Man's Land / What is there to talk about but difficult poems?", Adorno's suggestion that to write poetry after Auschwitz is "barbaric" is up for interrogation, as it is also countered. "Perhaps", Longley states elsewhere, Adorno was "suggesting that there would have to be distortions, that art would have to contort and hurt itself before it could face a nightmare like that".⁸⁸ The rhetorical question in "No Man's Land" both recognises the distortion and asserts the value of poetry (inherent in its difficulty) within that distorted and traumatised context. "Human suffering and death" Terence Brown writes, "are inescapable in Longley's sense of landscape".⁸⁹ Famously, Owen wrote in his draft preface: "if the spirit of [this book] survives - survives Prussia - my ambition...will have achieved fresher fields than Flanders".⁹⁰ If, at first glance, this seems to suggest that the war landscape can be erased from memory, or at least contained in the Western Front, it is obvious now (as it was to Owen then) that it cannot. It is as much a psychic condition as it was a geographical entity. But Owen still implies what Sassoon explicitly asserted: "The only effective answer that a poet can make to barbarism is poetry, for the only answer to death is the life of the spirit. Explosives cannot destroy the immaterial or dumbfound the utterance of inspiration."⁹¹ When, in the final stanza of "No Man's Land", the poet tries

⁸⁷ *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* 1937 (London: Faber, 1972) 421.

⁸⁸ "'Walking forwards into the past': an interview with Michael Longley" 39.

⁸⁹ "Who Dare to Speak? Ireland and the Great War" 233.

⁹⁰ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) 192.

⁹¹ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (London: Faber, 1945) 193.

to read “the constellations of brass buttons”, he is attempting to find his way in a landscape where, the previous stanza implies, poetry itself might founder, a No Man’s Land strewn with dead bodies in quantities like the stars.⁹² Longley’s poetic hinterland is always qualified by the “shell-shocked carrier pigeon” flapping behind the lines of the verse. But in the ebb and flow of what can or cannot be heard, seen, or created under the bombardment, the desire to build up what Sassoon describes as “humanities” is consistently present. “[T]o admit any hope of a better world”, Keith Douglas wrote, “is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it”,⁹³ and it is an awareness of the validity of this contradiction that informs the landscape of Longley’s poetry, as it informs the Great War itself.

IV.

Gorse Fires,⁹⁴ which appeared after a twelve year silence, was, rightly, hailed as a volume which signalled a new energy in Longley’s writing. And *The Ghost Orchid*, as Ian Duhig points out, “continues where *Gorse Fires*...left off”.⁹⁵ The two volumes negotiate both with each other, and with Longley’s previous collections. The poems work in the fine dividing line between memory and remembrance, birth and death, love and war, barbarity and civility. The Great War is less a direct subject for elegy than in the earlier poems; but No Man’s Land remains a poetic locale, a paradigm of the “betwixt and between”. That sensibility dominates *Gorse Fires*; in its epigraph imagined “Between now and one week ago...”; “Between hovers and not too far from the holt” (*GF*, 5); “the otter, on wet sand in between, / Engraves its own reflection and departure” (*GF*, 6); “travelling from one April to another. / It is the same train between the same embankments” (*GF*, 10); “I lie awake between the two sleeping couples” (*GF*,

⁹² The image also looks back through Rosenberg’s No Man’s Land to Keith Douglas’s “The Offensive 2”: “The stars are dead men in the sky”. *The Complete Poems* 94.

⁹³ “To J.C. Hall,” 10 Aug. 1943, *The Complete Poems* 124.

⁹⁴ (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991) Subsequent references to quotations from this volume are given in the body of the text as (*GF*, page number).

⁹⁵ Ian Duhig, rev. of *The Ghost Orchid*, by Michael Longley, *Fortnight* 340 (June 1995): 33.

17); “Between the bells and prayers...” (*GF*, 27); “harmonics, / A blackbird fluttering between electrified fences” (*GF*, 43). The sense of No Man’s Land as poetic hinterland expands in these later collections to become an all-encompassing hinterland as secure in its indeterminacy as Heaney’s specific geographical locale. The Great War elegies of *Poems 1963-1983* feed into the elegies of *Gorse Fires*. “Between Hovers”, an elegy for Joe O’Toole, looks back to “Third Light”: the dead badger in the poem is “a filament of light our lights had put out”. (It also evokes the guilt and love of Othello’s tormented “Put out the light, and then put out the light”⁹⁶.) The ghosts of “Second Sight” who collapse distinctions between past and future, life and death, metamorphosise into the “dying otter” who “gaze[d] right through me...as though it were only / Between hovers” (*GF*, 5). Edward Thomas’s “eye on what remained” is also the poet’s sense in “Sea Shanty” that “I am making do with what has been left me” (*GF*, 1). The poet’s relationship with his father, and through his father, the world wars, is rehearsed again in the Homeric translations that also reflect on violence in Northern Ireland. Odysseus is “the master-craftsman...love-poet, carpenter” (*GF*, 25); the compassionate custodian of memory who “drew the old man fainting to his breast and held him there / And cradled like driftwood the bones of his dwindling father” (*GF*, 33), (looking back to the voice “held secure”, “locked inside my head” of the early “In Memoriam”). But if he is the lover, he is also the killer who, in “The Butchers”, “made sure there were no survivors in his house / And that all the suitors were dead, heaped in blood and dust”, became “a lion dripping blood / From his chest and cheeks”, and who “hanged the women”, the “disloyal housemaids”. The poem deliberately returns to a specifically Irish context at the end: their souls “came to a bog-meadow full of bog-asphodels / Where the residents are ghosts or images of the dead” (*GF*, 51), an image that in “Bog Cotton” is connected with victims of both world wars and the Northern Ireland Troubles. The moments of poignant healing are counterbalanced by acts of butchery, and vice versa, *ad infinitum*, (or, in effect, for as long as one requires the other): the poems traverse the distance

⁹⁶ *Othello* V.ii. The episode described in “Between Hovers” - running over the badger - was one which, Michael Viney notes, “abounded in irony. It both demanded a poem and was a sacrifice to it”, “Requiem for a Badger,” *Irish Times* 1 Nov. 1986: Weekend 11.

between the two as they also acknowledge their mutual dependence. Selected poems by Robert Graves were published in two companion volumes - *Poems About Love* and *Poems About War*. In Graves's work the distinction is arbitrary, since the Gravesian notion of the Muse is in part a response to war and violence. In Longley's work, the distinction becomes logistically impossible. As Odysseus is a double-sided figure - "lover and killer...mingled" - so too the love poems of the later volumes are also the war poems. In "The Kilt", a poem reminiscent of "Third Light", the father's march into battle, to kill "in real life", is accompanied, in the final stanza, by an act of love:

You pick up the stitches and with needle and thread
Accompany him out of the grave and into battle,
Your arms full of material and his nakedness.⁹⁷

Longley writes: "I suppose that my love poetry is addressed to what I grandiosely call the female principle, to the Gravesian notion of the Muse".⁹⁸ If he is a Muse poet, he is also a war poet and a political poet in a sense that Graves, Longley's "kindred spirit", would, Mahon notes, have recognised. Longley protests against the "ruin" wrought by what Graves, in *The White Goddess*, describes as the "capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry".⁹⁹ Set against those capricious experiments is the act of naming, a technique which reaches its apotheosis in *Gorse Fires*, notably in "The Ice-Cream Man" and "Ghetto". It is a technique which was also a mainstay of First World War writing, a ritualistic assertion of sanity, or, in T.S. Eliot's phrase: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins".¹⁰⁰ It is present, not merely because it was a Georgian poetic convention, but because it offers at least a form of response to that which cannot be contained within a coherent narrative; in the last analysis, naming means something to write, the sounding of a voice. Edward Thomas's perceptions of the "ruin of Estaminet" are recorded in his diary as: "wet, mortar, litter, almanacs, bottles, broken glass, damp beds, dirty paper, knife, crucifix, statuette, old

⁹⁷ *The Ghost Orchid* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 35. Subsequent references for quotations from this volume are given in the body of the text as (TGO, page number).

⁹⁸ "Q & A with Michael Longley," *Irish Literary Supplement* 21.

⁹⁹ Derek Mahon, "An Enormous Yes," rev. of *Poems 1963-1983*, by Michael Longley, *Literary Review* 80 (Feb. 1985): 55.

¹⁰⁰ "The Waste Land," *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1974) 79.

chairs.”¹⁰¹ Sassoon habitually listed the belongings taken out to France after each leave; he also devotes two pages of his wartime diary to listing fifty-seven “[b]irds seen in Judaea”.¹⁰² Hemingway writes of the Great War:

...I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads the names of rivers...¹⁰³

John Lyon’s illuminating study of Longley’s lists notes that “their *recoverable* literary origins [are] in the epic lists of Homer”, but that the “attractions of naming, classifying and cataloguing also manifest themselves early in the poet’s own biography”.¹⁰⁴ The breakdown of the relationship between word, concept and experience in the Great War, the failure of language, and yet, paradoxically, the refuge of words, might also be added to this analysis, as an origin which combines the biographical and intertextual. In “Laertes”:

Odysseus sobbed in the shade of a pear-tree for his father
So old and pathetic that all he wanted then and there
Was to kiss him and hug him and blurt out the whole story,
But the whole story is one catalogue and then another
(GF, 33)

Listing, then, is a form in which the inaccessibility of the subject-matter and the inadequacy of language is turned into the subject-matter. “Laertes” has Gravesian echoes: “There is one story and one story only”¹⁰⁵ which is told and retold. The one story in Longley - or rather the “whole story” - is itself the problem of telling. In this sense, “The Ice-Cream Man”, is, understandably, as Lyon notes, “currently acquiring

¹⁰¹ *The Diary of Edward Thomas* 16.

¹⁰² *Siegfried Sassoon’s Diaries 1915-1918* 233-34.

¹⁰³ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* 1929 (London: Penguin, 1935) 144.

¹⁰⁴ John Lyon, “Michael Longley’s Lists,” *English* 45.183 (Autumn 1996): 234.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Graves, “To Juan at the Winter Solstice,” *Selected Poems*, ed. Paul O’Prey (London: Penguin, 1986) 158.

the status of a poetic touchstone”.¹⁰⁶ Every word in the poem “works for its keep”, and does so with awareness of its own inadequacy. It imitates a traditional Georgian form of pastoral - naming as many flora as possible in one poem - with the naming an almost “religious” incantation, an attempted stay against violence which, in contrast to Georgian pastoral, is aware of itself as such not only within history but within the context of the poem:

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach:
 You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
 They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
 And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
 I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
 I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
 Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
 Herb robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
 Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
 Yarrow, lady’s bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel.
 (GF, 49)

The poem incorporates the violence which implicitly tries to unravel the list even as it is formed. Thus, the list is felt to be never-ending: that sense is illustrative of its limitations - one might list forever, but the death still occurred; it is also implicitly an indictment of the on-going violence which prompted the list, and an acknowledgement that the effects of that violence are not finite. (“A catalogue like this one is meant to go on forever”.¹⁰⁷) “Such a poem’s power”, Lyon argues, “derives from the opposition of the composed coherence to be seen and heard *within* the list, and the *incoherence* of the context in which that list is placed”.¹⁰⁸ The two lists of flavours and flowers within the poem, as Michael Allen notes, also parallel each other as “equally inadequate anecdotes to the ‘murder’”.¹⁰⁹ They exist on either side (“before” and after) of the short sentence - the killing - which neither of them reaches: structurally, the poem embodies the impossibility of traversing the psychological distance between then and now - pre- and post-violent interruption. The once inspiring and consolatory concepts of sacrifice,

¹⁰⁶ “Michael Longley’s Lists” 242.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Longley “A Tongue at Play” 115.

¹⁰⁸ “Michael Longley’s Lists” 240.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Allen, Letter to the Editor, *Thumbscrew* 4 (Spring 1996): 44.

glory and honour no longer hold meaning after the Great War. In "The Ice-Cream Man", the catalogue itself becomes the "in memoriam", rather than any abstract ideals embodied within it: the flower-names, in Longley's own phrase, are turned into "a wreath of words".¹¹⁰

For Longley, the idea of poetry as a gesture of remembrance, a "wreath", is a way of redirecting the traditional forms of remembrance that have sometimes served to obscure rather than illuminate history. "The Remembrance Day ceremony", he argues, "encourages us *not* to remember how shrapnel and bullets flay and shatter human flesh and bones, how continuous bombardment destroys minds as well as bodies". The recitation of Binyon's "We will remember them" from "For the Fallen" is, he suggests, used as a "mind-numbing narcotic". In opposition to this, he places the work of Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Sorley and Gurney, work which undermines the "cult of remembrance" which has developed over the years.¹¹¹ To oppose, as Sorley did, "mind-numbing" consolations - the forms of remembrance that are akin to, and as culpable as, forgetfulness - is also the driving force behind Longley's latest collection, *The Ghost Orchid*. A volume concerned with memory, it is dominated by the colours and symbols of remembrance, those associated with the wars of the twentieth century - snow, white feathers; red poppies, blood - colours that also evoke the sacrament (sacrifice) of the Eucharist. "We Irish", Longley writes, "are good at claiming a monopoly on human suffering. We are good at resurrecting and distorting the past in order to evade the present. In Ireland we must break the mythic cycles and resist unexamined, ritualistic forms of commemoration."¹¹² One of the strengths of *The Ghost Orchid* is that it uses the images of "mythic cycles" in order to break or disrupt them: traditional symbolism is redirected in order to interrogate the values (or evasions) behind it. Thus, in "Poppies", the poppy is the wound itself; but it also inflicts wounds in a controversial remembrance that has little to do with the dead and everything to do with versions of history:

¹¹⁰ "A Tongue at Play" 114.

¹¹¹ Michael Longley, "Say Not Soft Things," *Remembrance*, ed. Gordon Lucy and Elaine McClure (Armagh: Ulster Society (Publications) Ltd., 1997) 122.

¹¹² "Memory and Acknowledgement" 158.

Some people tried to stop other people wearing poppies
 And ripped them from lapels as though uprooting poppies
 From Flanders fields, but the others hid inside their poppies
 Razor blades and added to their poppies more red poppies.
 (TGO, 40)

The poem describes events in Ireland, notably in Belfast, in the post-war years: it also indicts what becomes a self-perpetuating blood-feud, from war to remembrance to war. Two histories compete: one which would “uproot” its past from any connection with “Flanders fields”, the other which wears its historical wounding on the Western Front as a weapon.

If the poppy is seen here as a tool manipulated by competing and reductive mythologies, in “Buchenwald Museum” it is rehabilitated as a symbol of that which it is both difficult and painful to remember - the history that is forgotten by, because it complicates, political “bias”:

Among the unforgettable exhibits one
 Was an official apology for bias. Outside

Although a snowfall had covered everything
 A wreath of poppies was just about visible.

No matter how heavily the snow may come down
 We have to allow the snow to wear a poppy.
 (TGO, 41)

The poem’s imagery, as with others in the collection, also looks to Mahon, MacNeice, Eliot, Wallace Stevens. To “allow the snow to wear a poppy”, however difficult that conjunction might be, incorporates a veiled allusion to MacNeice’s “Snow”: “the great bay-window.../ Spawning snow and pink roses against it / Soundlessly collateral and incompatible....There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses”.¹¹³ (“Between”, as Edna Longley notes here, “both separates and joins”.¹¹⁴) Longley’s snow is influenced by Mahon’s “Snow Party”, where “Elsewhere they are burning / Witches and heretics”; both owe something to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where the “pathetic fallacy” associating winter with death and spring with birth is parodied and

¹¹³ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* 30.

¹¹⁴ *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber, 1988) x.

reversed: "April" is "the cruellest month...mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain", a painful awakening and remembering set in opposition to the "Winter" which, paradoxically, insulates the mind from reality, and "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow".¹¹⁵ The "snowscape" of poems in *The Ghost Orchid* (and *Gorse Fires*) is an inherently ambiguous and dualistic landscape, one which may be both a healing and a cover-up; it may symbolise death, or disguise it, obscure images or freeze them. Thus, one side of the image - "the snowscape of the big double-bed" (*TGO*, 34); snow as "feathers from the wings of Icarus", an imaginary fountain of poetry (*TGO*, 57) - is compromised by awareness of its other - "the need for whitewash and disinfectant" (*GF*, 51); the obliteration of voice, "as if snow had fallen..." (*TGO*, 54). The child in "Ghetto" who is fixed in memory - "He turns into a little snowman and refuses to melt" (*GF*, 41) - and who lingers on into *The Ghost Orchid* ("the melting snowman was somebody's child" 10), also reminds of the paradoxical nature of elegising in Stevens's "The Snow Man", the "anti-elegiac" and "anti-emotional" striving after a "mind of winter...not to think / Of any misery".¹¹⁶ In *Tuppenny Stung*, Longley quotes Don Shriver's "[t]he cure and the remembrance are co-terminous".¹¹⁷ "Remembrance" itself, though, the experience of Northern Ireland makes clear, is a double-edged sword, one which can harden into what Mahon calls "the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural" or melt into the "fluidity of a possible life".¹¹⁸ For Longley, writing from a hinterland informed by both, the "cure" is in the balance of opposing forces, the potentiality of the space between: "The wind-farmer's small-holding reaches as far as the horizon. / Between fields of hailstones and raindrops his frost-flowers grow" (*TGO*, 50).

¹¹⁵ T.S.Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* 63.

¹¹⁶ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1955) 9-10. Ramazani, in his discussion of this poem, argues that the trope Stevens rejects "leaks back into the poem", turning it into a form of self-elegy. See *Poetry of Mourning* 102-03.

¹¹⁷ *Tuppenny Stung* 76

¹¹⁸ Derek Mahon, "Poetry in Northern Ireland," *Twentieth Century Studies* 4 (Nov. 1970): 93.

V.

"[T]he world wars", Edna Longley writes, "divide imaginations [in Irish writing], if more subtly than the way Remembrance Day every November divides Dublin".¹¹⁹ They would seem also to divide reputations in Northern Ireland. "Being misrepresented, swindled, short-changed is", Michael Longley is aware, "the perpetual risk all poets have to take".¹²⁰ Those comments, made in relation to MacNeice as part of a process whereby MacNeice's misrepresentation has slowly been redressed, have become, ironically enough, and for some of the same reasons, not irrelevant in terms of the critical reception of Longley's own work. If his poetic hinterland is a "No Man's Land", it is also the case that his reputation has sometimes foundered there. Some of the terms in which Edna Longley points up "The Importance of Keith Douglas" also apply in part to Longley: Douglas is, as Geoffrey Hill noted, both "established" and "overlooked".¹²¹ English criticism misses the point that "war poetry has become continuous, ubiquitous and hardly distinguishable from any other kind of poetry".¹²² "War poetry" can thus be sidelined within the tradition. In addition, "[c]ritics have mistaken [Douglas's] masterly verse control for a cerebral detachment".¹²³ The neglect is, Edna Longley suggests, indicative of an aesthetic conflict in England "between the style-faction and the content faction".¹²⁴ Ulster poets are, she notes, "sniped at in No Man's Land for not keeping their enviable raw material raw enough".¹²⁵

In its most extreme form, as has been seen, canon-building in Ireland has not so much sidelined "war poetry" as it has sidelined the whole experience of the world wars. Hence MacNeice's struggle to assert both his Irish identity and the impact on his writing of the First and Second world wars. Michael Longley's early and consistent engagement with those wars *before* the recent resurgence of interest in the Irish involvement in them

¹¹⁹ *The Living Stream* 156.

¹²⁰ Michael Longley, "Louis MacNeice: A Misrepresented Poet," *Dublin Magazine* 6.1 (Spring 1967): 68.

¹²¹ Quoted in Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 94.

¹²² Michael Hamburger, quoted in Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 94.

¹²³ Rieger Garfitt, quoted in Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* 94.

¹²⁴ *Poetry in the Wars* 94.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

has led to misrepresentation of his work, a misrepresentation that causes him to fall between English and Irish versions of their literary heritage. Thus, in the late 1970s, when the centrality of the Great War to his poetry is acknowledged by reviewers, some confusion about the significance of that presence is also in evidence. In a review of *The Echo Gate*, Thomas McCarthy describes Longley's voice as "a benign unionist voice", one which is characterised by "continuous references to *England's* experience of the war, to the First World War in particular. One mourns so that one may belong..."¹²⁶ Two assumptions hover behind these remarks: first, that to be Unionist means to want to be English, that Unionism is in sympathy with an English perception of history (when in fact it has been, if anything, out of sympathy with it); second, and connected, that the Great War references can have little, if anything, to do with Ireland. It is a misconception that has also dogged MacNeice, who, James Liddy states, "was in Ireland, in the South, when the war against Hitler was declared" but "was swept with the natural jingoism of the Loyalist...when the reality of the conflict materialized".¹²⁷ On the contrary, Longley's imaginative engagement with the war, through the experience of his English father, is, like MacNeice's, extended to encompass both English and Irish (and other) experiences of war.

If the choice of subject has been seen to place Longley (and MacNeice) outside the "Irish" tradition, so too has his style. In fact, between style-faction and content-faction, Longley seems at times to be in a no-win situation, wrong-footed in relation to English and Irish versions of the canon both for his choice of subject-matter and for the supposed lack of it. The "tight-lipped quality" of the verse "lead[s] one to think of it as Protestant";¹²⁸ Longley is seen as an adherent of the Movement's style, an adept at producing the "well-made poem", whose formalism is indicative of a refined Anglicanism. In spite of Eavan Boland's early, and perceptive, correction in a review of Longley's first collection, *No Continuing City* - "to decide that...technical control somehow implies emotional caution, would be to yield to the most facile and

¹²⁶ "Northern Voices" 13.

¹²⁷ James Liddy, "Ulster Poets and the Protestant Muse," *Éire-Ireland* 14.2 (Summer 1979): 121.

¹²⁸ Colin Folk, quoted in Liddy, "Ulster Poets and the Protestant Muse" 123.

fashionable of critical assumptions. It would also be a human loss" - in Philip Hobsbaum's recent review of *The Ghost Orchid*, he claims that "one misses in Longley...the urgency of an inner life", that "[o]ne finds oneself speaking of style rather than subject, as though manner itself were the poet's material".¹²⁹ As Michael Allen demonstrates, Hobsbaum finds himself speaking in that way only because "the significance of [the] poems" he discusses "escapes [him] so completely".¹³⁰ But Hobsbaum's review, though unhelpful in all other respects, does at least serve to illustrate, since it is one of the more explicit formulations of the position, the perpetuation of value judgements within which, bizarrely, poetic technique can be a suspect element in poetry, and size has a virtue all its own.¹³¹ As with Douglas, Longley's style has been associated with "cerebral detachment": thus, Brian McIlroy sees Longley as lacking Heaney's "understanding of victims" in "Punishment" and "The Grauballe Man". In Longley, he suggests, "there is a greater sense of secularization, of scientificity, of dehumanization".¹³² As evidence, he notes the prevalence of body parts in Longley's poems, but in disembodiment the images themselves from the poems in which they appear, misses the understanding of victimisation that reveals itself through minute detail. (Thus, his reading of "Master of Ceremonies" - "the park attendant's job appears to be that of collecting littered limbs until his sack is heavy"¹³³ - overlooks the fact that the "park" is No Man's Land, and the "attendant", the "retarded uncle", is himself the victim killed whilst undertaking one of the most barbaric tasks necessary on the Western Front.) Dismemberment and disembodiment in Longley poetry are, McIlroy argues, indicative of "Protestant consciousness [as] one of synecdoche, always a part for a slippery whole".¹³⁴ The reason itself, however, may be rather less cerebral than

¹²⁹ Philip Hobsbaum, "'Growing like a coral among shadows': literary life respectable," rev. of *The Ghost Orchid*, by Michael Longley, *Thumbscrew* 3 (Autumn/Winter 1995): 58.

¹³⁰ See Michael Allen, "Letter to the Editor," *Thumbscrew* 4 (Spring 1996): 44-45.

¹³¹ Hobsbaum's response to Allen's Letter to the Editor challenges Allen's reading of "The Ice-Cream Man" as, amongst other things, a comment on ecological threat on the grounds that the poem is only ten lines long. See *Thumbscrew* 4 (Spring 1996): 45-47.

¹³² Brian McIlroy, "Poetic Imagery as Political Fetishism: The Example of Michael Longley," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 16.1 (July 1990): 61.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 62

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 61

this: not so much “morbid curiosity”¹³⁵ and political displacement as imaginative engagement with a century of war in which those images were literally present.

Connected to such misrepresentations is the fact that Longley’s work has also been, in a more literal sense, “short-changed” in terms of the still only very slight critical response to it, certainly in comparison with the (sometimes excessive) ink spillage on the subject of Heaney’s poetry. Several reasons have been put forward to explain why Longley’s career “has not yet received the critical attention it deserves”.¹³⁶ McIlroy suggests that Edna Longley’s silence on the subject of Longley’s work “has created a critical gap”;¹³⁷ Tom Adair attributes the neglect to the fact that both Heaney and Mahon “were perceived to have evolved their own stance and idiom, to have created a poetic identikit intelligible to critics”.¹³⁸ Peter McDonald probes further into some of the implications of this last perception:

...the critical boom in Ulster poetry...was a far from unmixed blessing; for the poets themselves, the opportunity to write for a large audience has brought with it the problems of having to satisfy the demand for a public, responsible voice of the kind proper to war-poets. Of course the responsibility game is one that can be played profitably: full-blown mythologising, as in *North* or *The Rough Field*, is only one approach; there are also Paulin’s rasping, strident Ulsterisms, Mahon’s self-conscious cosmopolitan exile or Muldoon’s oblique parables, all of these leading back to the ever-fertile dilemma of Being A Poet From Northern Ireland. Michael Longley’s poetry doesn’t fit into this scheme quite so easily...¹³⁹

In effect, Longley’s work, like MacNeice’s, disrupts both the stereotypes of an “Irish poet” and, as McDonald point out, a “Poet From Northern Ireland”. As a result, as is also the case with MacNeice, his place within critical debates is often either non-existent

¹³⁵ Ibid. 62.

¹³⁶ Terence Brown, “Who Dares to Speak?: Ireland in the Great War” 232.

¹³⁷ “Poetic Imagery as Political Fetishism” 59. The extent to which the agreement between Edna Longley and Michael Longley that, as Longley puts it, “she won’t write about my work” (“Q & A with Michael Longley,” *Irish Literary Supplement* 21), has encouraged neglect on the part of other critics is, of course, impossible to quantify. It is, however, worth noting that Edna Longley’s formidable critical presence in the field of contemporary British and Irish literary criticism - a presence which engenders a high level of response - has meant that the example of Longley’s poetry, since it is excluded from the content (although not the terms) of her criticism, has not often been picked up or explored by other critics responding to her work.

¹³⁸ “Of Flock and Fold” 16.

¹³⁹ Peter McDonald, “From Ulster With Love” 14.

or anomalous. Some of the criticism that does exist is offered solely as tribute, is rarely contentious, and all too often apologises, paradoxically, both for its own existence and for the critical neglect of the poet.¹⁴⁰ It seems at times, with regard to Longley, that even angels fear to tread. Neil Corcoran rightly notes that Longley is “a much stranger poet than most reviews have made him seem”.¹⁴¹ As with Graves, critical neglect may be, amongst other things, symptomatic of a refusal to acknowledge the implications of the poetry in question. Hence, as Peter McDonald notes, he is too often given “vague praise for the integrity of his craftsmanship, his accomplishment as a ‘nature-’ or ‘love-’ poet, but too little real attention as an artist whose work is ‘responsible’, not in any self-congratulating or grandiose way”.¹⁴² And this in spite of the fact that, as Robert Johnstone points out, Longley “has so consistently, so directly and so effectively written about the actual human damage of the past twenty years in Northern Ireland”.¹⁴³

Seamus Heaney’s high profile, notably (however misleadingly) as poet of the Troubles, and the fact that he and Longley are contemporaries, has led to comparisons between them which are, McDonald suggests, unhelpful, since “Heaney is working in a different direction”.¹⁴⁴ But comparing the critical reception of the two does illustrate some of the anomalies through which Longley’s achievement is sidelined. Thus, for Hobsbaum, in the early days of the Belfast “Group”, Heaney is a traditionalist stick with which to beat emerging structuralist agendas, a poet who adapts and rejuvenates a British empirical tradition.¹⁴⁵ Twenty-five years later, Heaney is, for the Field Day enterprise, the poet with European orientation, an orientation which, Richard Kirkland argues, is indicative of a desire “to escape from British empirical paradigms”.¹⁴⁶ Either way, Longley, less user-friendly for critics than Heaney, is sometimes adopted as the

¹⁴⁰ Mark Storey’s “Michael Longley: A Precarious Act of Balancing,” *Fortnight* 194 (May 1983) illustrates this sensibility: “With some trepidation...I offer some reflections at a distance...” 21.

¹⁴¹ Neil Corcoran, “Last Words: Michael Longley’s Elegies,” *Poetry Wales* 24.2: 16.

¹⁴² “From Ulster With Love” 14.

¹⁴³ Robert Johnstone, “Harmonics Between Electrified Fences,” rev. of *Gorse Fires*, by Michael Longley, *Honest Ulsterman* 92 (1991): 79.

¹⁴⁴ “From Ulster With Love” 16.

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of Hobsbaum’s “agenda” for the Belfast Group see Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London and New York: Longman, 1996) 80-81.

¹⁴⁶ *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965* 139.

“other” who serves to illustrate what the “Irish” tradition is not. In the introduction to the “Contemporary Irish Poetry” section of the *Field Day Anthology*, Declan Kiberd writes that Heaney’s poetry is characterised by “[a] sustained attempt...to locate the northern violence in wider patterns of universal history”; likewise, Seamus Deane’s recent poetry “has evinced a strong sense of European history and a desire to locate the Irish experience as part of that wider pattern”.¹⁴⁷ In contrast, Kiberd writes that:

Longley may have more in common with the semi-detached suburban muse of Philip Larkin and post-war England than with Heaney or Montague. His self-effacing courtesy, his dry good humour, and his addiction to off-key closures, all align him with British post-modernism...And yet the very fact that he should apply these techniques to the Belfast of the ‘Troubles’ indicates also his sustained attempt to widen the traditions of modern Irish poetry.¹⁴⁸

There is, of course, a huge difference in these two views of poetic activity: Longley, according to Kiberd, is bringing Britishness into Ireland (or trying to); Deane and Heaney are reaching out from Ireland (and for Ireland) to a European context. They also incorporate a judgement: Deane and Heaney are working from within an Irish tradition, exploring new contexts for that tradition; Longley, significantly, is seen as being outside the Irish tradition, trying to find a way in from a British perspective.¹⁴⁹ Antimacassars, and all they represent, seem to be, for Kiberd, fundamentally un-Irish:

The influence of Auden on Mahon, Longley and Montague is at least as extensive as that of Kavanagh...And there is good reason for this. Auden was, along with Philip Larkin, the artist of post-imperial England, a land of anticlimax and antimacassars...Their tone seemed strangely suitable for

¹⁴⁷ Declan Kiberd, “Contemporary Irish Poetry,” *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 3 (Derry: Field Day, 1991) 1364, 1377.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 1375.

¹⁴⁹ One might go so far as to say that one is intended to suggest a post-colonial activity, the other is redolent of a lingering colonialism. There are also shades of Daniel Corkery’s view of the Irish tradition here. Corkery suggests that Irish nationalism as a guiding spirit in Irish literature, the grounding in a particular locale, language and folk tradition, may be the way to create genuinely international art. In contrast, the distribution of English literature and culture throughout the world, notably in Ireland, is indicative not of internationalism but of a provincialism that does not answer the needs of the age. See the conclusion to *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature 1931* (Dublin: Mercier, 1966) 233-43.

those Irish poets born too late to partake in the heroic phase, either of Ireland or of modern poetry.¹⁵⁰

“I must...listen to a lecture on Trench Warfare, and discuss yesterday’s Field Day”, Sassoon complained in 1918: “No peace for poets”.¹⁵¹ The comment is not without its prophetic resonances. The revival of interest in the Irish experience of the First World War points up the former neglect, or denial, of aspects of Irish history and culture, by Field Day and others, a denial in evidence when imaginative engagement with the war is viewed as an enterprise that takes place primarily outside the “Irish” tradition, at best in a No Man’s Land between English and Irish traditions, the one “a botched version”¹⁵² of the other. As neglect of the memory of Ireland’s Great War involvement is gradually redressed, it should become apparent, if it was not before, that Longley’s poetry, in its placing of the “Irish experience” in the context of the European wars of the twentieth century deserves, ironically enough, the encomiums Kiberd reserves for Heaney’s poetry: that it is characterised by “ethical as well as aesthetic probing”, and that it makes “[a] sustained attempt...to locate the northern violence in wider patterns of universal history”.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Declan Kiberd, “Contemporary Irish Poetry” 1311-2. This is the only reference to Longley in the introduction; Kiberd’s notes to Longley’s poems attempt to contextualise them within English lower middle-class culture and North of England landscapes. Mahon’s comments, in 1973, that the suburbs of Belfast are “the final anathema for the traditional Irish imagination”, would seem to be still pertinent in relation to Field Day’s representation of Longley. Mahon continues, “[a] lot of people who are regarded as important in Irish poetry cannot accept that the Protestant suburbs in Belfast are a part of Ireland, you know. At an aesthetic level they can’t accept that”, “Harriet Cooke Talks to the Poet Derek Mahon,” *Irish Times* 17 Jan. 1973: 10.

¹⁵¹ *Siegfried Sassoon’s Diaries 1915-1918* 260

¹⁵² Kiberd, “Contemporary Irish Poetry” 1312.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* 1364.

Afterword



"...it is those artists who re-create life rather than try to recapture it who, in one way, prove the good historians in the end."

-Robert Kee¹

At the end of the First World War, the condition of the landscape of some parts of the Western Front was such that "some thought restoration of the area impossible and advised that it simply be abandoned".² Paul Nash describes the battlefield thus: "...the shells never cease...they plunge into the grave which is this land...It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless."³ The task of "smoothing out" the landscape of the Great War is one which, Paul Fussell noted, was still continuing sixty years after the war ended. The fields are, he writes, "destined to extrude their rusty metal fragments for centuries"; "[e]very week bones come to light".⁴ From this distance, then, it may seem curious that, as Geoff Dyer points out, the renovation of the area, in so far as it could be accomplished, caused some veterans to worry that "insufficient traces would remain of what had taken place": "Nature herself", Vera Brittain wrote, "conspires with time to cheat our recollections; grass has grown over the shell-holes at Ypres, and the cultivated meadows of industrious peasants have replaced the hut-scarred fields of Etaples and Camiers...".⁵

But two things intertwine here: one is the sense that the visibly scarred landscape has literally not forgotten, that however effective the cover-up job, it will still occasionally, and unexpectedly, offer reminders of the war; the other, which could not have been foreseen by the war's survivors, is the fact that the landscape's status as conscience and custodian of memory has been heightened rather than suppressed by its

¹ Quoted in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975) 311.

² Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 69

³ Quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989) 147.

⁴ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 69-70.

⁵ Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Penguin, 1995) 124.

restoration. In other words, the fact that memory of the war lies, in part, in the realm of the imagination would seem to have belied the veterans' fears by widening rather than limiting the war's long-term cultural impact. It may also account for the fact that the Great War has been seen as a paradigm for all war in the twentieth century. As Vernon Scannell, a Second World War veteran, writes: "Whenever war is spoken of / I find / The war that was called Great invades the mind".⁶

While the more tangible effects of the war on everyday existence in the western world, and on the war landscape itself, are still in evidence, so too is its more intangible presence in what Frye calls "the total cultural form of our present life".⁷ That presence has become, through the imagination's derivation of images "not from experience but from mythic narrative",⁸ a self-perpetuating one. Edmund Blunden's sense of eternal return to the subject of the Great War - "I must go over the ground again" - is a return which is less a deliberate undertaking than it is an almost involuntary compulsion, one destined to continue "until that hour when agony's clawed face softens into the smilingness of a young spring day". "[I]t was", he writes, "impossible not to look again, and to descry the ground, how thickly and innumerable yet it was strewn with the facts or notions of war experience."⁹

It is a sense which in some ways reverberates through the century. While the terms in which Fussell argues that "[t]he whole texture of British daily life could be said to commemorate the war still"¹⁰ are not straightforwardly applicable to Ireland, particularly the Republic of Ireland, the traumatic upheavals in Irish history in the war years, upheavals which continue to have violent repercussions, make the war, even if obliquely, an imaginative ground to which Irish writers return again and again. It is not an activity confined to the generation who experienced the Great War. Indeed, it is perhaps the peculiarity of the Irish case that aspects of Great War history have been

⁶ "The Great War," *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence*, ed. Martin Stephen (London: J.M.Dent, 1993) 311.

⁷ Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 335.

⁸ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 324.

⁹ "Preliminary", *Undertones of War* (London: Penguin, 1937) 8.

¹⁰ *The Great War and Modern Memory* 315.

told, sometimes for the first time, through the imaginations of writers who never experienced the Great War, but whose sense of writing in a century which has also been a closed circuit of violence, its end in its beginning, has been heightened by their experience of Northern Ireland. In addition to the writers already discussed, that activity is apparent in the recent work of a younger generation of Northern Irish poets: in, for example, Paulin's preoccupation with the relationship between art and war, and with Yeats's response to the Great War, in *Walking a Line*; in Ciaran Carson's projection back through contemporary Northern Irish violence in *Belfast Confetti* to the Home Rule crisis, and his vision of the streets of Belfast, a city "built on mud", as continually shifting, a cityscape reminiscent of the trench-world with its transience, its "street-names"; in Medbh McGuckian's exploration in *Captain Lavender*, sometimes through familiar war poetry images, of the nexus between war, sexuality, creativity and death.

"There will be no end to clearing up after the war", Michael Longley writes in his recent poem "The War Graves".¹¹ It is a phrase which resonates both literally and metaphorically. Geoff Dyer suggests that:

Every generation since the armistice has believed that it will be the last for whom the Great War has any meaning. Now, when the last survivors are within a few years of their deaths, I too wonder if the memory of the war will perish with the generation after mine.¹²

But the familiar Great War images and the "deathscape" they create in the mind's eye are, Scannell writes, "only part / Of what it is that slyly probes the heart". For each new generation, the Great War has meaning because, as Dyer also recognises, it is not simply the case that "the war generates memory", memory itself "has determined - and continues to determine - the meaning of the war".¹³ As long as it continues to do so, in a retrospective on history that is simultaneously an introspective exploration of contemporary culture, the war holds its ground in twentieth-century writing, as it is also the case that much of that writing is, imaginatively, grounded in the war.

¹¹ *The Observer Review* 9 Nov. 1997: 16.

¹² *The Missing of the Somme* 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Appendix A

THIS IS THE HOUR

Not one but all, for each is Britain's need,
Think not that you may live a slothful life,
Nor pay the awful voice of warning heed.
Think not your homes can stay untouched by strife
If you still turn deaf ears towards the call
That asks not one, nor many men, but all.

A hundred years ago your fathers fought
As you must fight for liberty today.
Beside that heritage all else was naught,
And shall you prove yourselves less staunch than they?
The hour has struck, and Britain asks your vow
Of loyal and ungrudging service - now!

Think, from our cliffs the eye can almost see
Fair Belgian home go up in smoke and flame.
Unless you fight to keep your homeland free,
She too must know that agony and shame.
Then it may be, when Britain meets her fate
Her laggards shall arise - Too late! Too late!

C.E.B. Newtownards Chronicle
12 Sept 1914: 6. (The poem also
appeared in English newspapers.)

THE MEN OF ULSTER

What of the men of Ulster? will they merely stand in the gate,
On watch and ward for the province, in the hour of England's fate?
Would they be men of Ulster, were such their Captain's call,
To reckon of naught but themselves alone, though the Empire stand or fall?

Dear to the men of Ulster are her sunlit fields and bays,
The whirr of the loom and the hammer's ring, and the harvest of toiling days;
And dearer yet is the birthright, won by their sires of old,
Their heritage forever, not to be bought or sold.

But dearest to men of Ulster is the Empire's far-flung line,
Where her sons have sped and toiled and bled, 'neath the palm-tree and the pine;
Where White has fought and Dufferin wrought, and their spirits hover still,
Bidding to deeds of high emprise, and valour, and iron will.

So forward the men of Ulster for the Empire and the King!
Though their own fate be in debate, no thought of wavering!
The sword half-drawn in her own behalf, in Ulster's red right hand
Will leap from the scabbard and flash like fire for the common Motherland.

What of the men of Ulster? Hark to their armed tread,
As they turn their backs to the Province, and face to the front instead.
And wherever the fight is hottest, and the sorest task is set,
Ulster will strike for England - and England will not forget!

F.S.Boas
Newtownards Chronicle
31 October 1914: 13.

THE RED HAND OF ULSTER

When one great wave has shatter'd
A coast that gleamed in light,
We look, and share the wonder,
Amazement and affright;
But what can hide its grandeur
And what can veil its might?

On gray and heathy hillsides,
In valleys bowered in leaves,
In wide and flowery meadows,
Where peaceful sheep and bees
Strayed thro' the days of waiting,
No change the eye perceives.

The mist-clouds veil the mountains,
The mist-rains drift and wing
Across the ancient castle,
The homely cot where cling
The climbing sprays of woodbine,
Where wild birds hop and sing.

Now comes the news of battle -
The long-awaited roll
Of our great Western rampart -
A wall of thews, and soul -
And Ulster's sons are writing
Their names upon a scroll.

That rain-swept, mist-land gathers
Before their eyes, as forth
They sweep - the watched-for Ulsters,
For honour of the North;
For Freedom's best and dearest -
For Britain's word and worth.

That wave of Northern valour
Is like the advancing tide,
And naught can cool or curb it,
And naught can change its stride;
In "Derry," "Enniskillen,"
And Omagh they reside!

'Tis Lurgan and Dungannon,
Armagh and proud Belfast;
St, Johnston, Londonderry,
And Donegal's grey vast -
That flit before their vision
As trench by trench is passed!

The roar of bursting cannon
Breaks voices faintly heard -
The voices of their youth time,
Familiar jest and word;
But, hark! the call is "Onward!"
And visions grown more blurred.

Hurrah! the drive so eager,
So long-continued, deep,
The firmly driven bayonet,
The stumble and the leap -
Grow less intense, the foeman
Has wavered in the sweep!

And in the lone, grey cottage,
A trembling hand essays
To hold the fateful message
Which speaks a proud son's praise;
"He nobly did his duty,
And fell - there is a haze...

Read, in another homestead -
A loftier home, now chill;
The page tells of a soldier
Who led his men until
Their came the hue of sunset -
He lives in honour still.

"Dead" do you call these heroes?
Dead? who have given birth
To all that makes life living -
To all that is of worth;
No, never, never write it -
This "death" is Freedom's girth!

This wounding is for homeland -
For Britain's winsome weal -
Through all the years advancing,
A theme for song, a peal
That swings in jubilation -
How Ulster met the steel!

How Ulster claimed the expected
Already given, cheer;
How Ulster's hand directed
The torch which yet shall sear
The remnant of the Prussian,
And make the future clear!

William J. Gallagher, Co. Donegal
Belfast Evening Telegraph 12 July 1916: 2.

ULSTER'S SACRIFICE

Men have done brave deeds, we know
By the history we have read,
But the history of those by-gone days
To us is almost dead.
And so today we're looking to
A history yet to be,
Of how the boys from Ulster did,
In a land across the sea.

'Twas on the morning of the first
July, nineteen-sixteen,
Those gallant lads from Ulster,
Across "No Man's Land" were seen
To charge the German trenches, which
They did without a sigh;
And the only word was spoken
Was their "No Surrender" cry.

The first line trench they reached, brave lads,
Though many then had fell,
But on, still on, and onward,
Like demons out of hell,
The second line they reached at last -
Their number now were small -
But on, until the third line trench
Into their hands did fall.

They'll never be forgotten,
And in the years to be
Their praises will be sounded
In lands across the sea;
And our children's children will,
With pride, the history tell,
Of how for King and Country
Their forefathers fought and fell.

We miss their smiling faces,
But we know they're happy still,
They did their duty faithfully,
With a noble heart and will.
And now that they are dead and gone,
We can't forget them never,
And in our hearts their memories
Will reign for aye and ever.

Farewell, farewell our comrades dear,
On earth we'll meet no more,
But we hope to meet in heaven above,
On that eternal shore.
We hope to meet them in that land -
The land for rich and poor -
Where peace shall reign eternally,
And wars shall be no more.

S.J. Donnelly and R. Reid, 12th Batt. R.I.Rifles, B.E.F.
Newtownards Chronicle 25 Nov. 1916: 7.

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